



Photo: Partners meeting on Larrakia Country in November to discuss eye care needs. L-R Tanya Morris, Country Director, The Fred Hollows Foundation – Indigenous Australia Program, Sara Garrison, Director First Nations Eye Health Alliance, Shaun Tatipata, Chair First Nations Eye Health Alliance, Theo Charalambous, President of Optometry Australia, Rose (Rose) Fonua, CEO First Nations Eye Health Alliance and Tania McLeod, Program Manager, The Fred Hollows Foundation – Indigenous Australia Program

New Collaboration to Close the Gap in Refractive Error for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

The First Nations Eye Health Alliance (FNEHA), Optometry Australia, and The Fred Hollows Foundation have united in a national effort to tackle Refractive Error, one of the largest contributors to avoidable vision loss for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Refractive error is a common vision problem that makes sight blurry or distorted. It includes short-sightedness, long-sightedness, astigmatism, and age-related difficulty seeing up close. The good news is it's easy to diagnose and usually correctable with glasses, contact lenses, or surgery. In Australia, refractive error remains a leading cause of avoidable vision impairment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, even though a simple eye test and access to affordable glasses can often resolve the issue altogether.

The three organisations are calling on governments to walk alongside them and communities to remove the barriers that continue to limit access to timely eye examinations, early intervention, and culturally safe pathways to glasses.

A First Nations-Led Pathway to Clear Vision

FNEHA Co-Chair Shaun Tatipata said the partnership reflects a clear, community-driven mandate to fix a long-standing gap in the system.

“Our mob have been asking for better access to eye checks and glasses for years. Refractive error is one of the simplest issues to fix, and doing so would prevent nearly half of all avoidable vision loss in our communities. We are ready to lead this work, and we’re inviting sector partners and governments to walk alongside us.”

FNEHA CEO Lose (Rose) Fonua said the approach aligns directly with the Closing the Gap reforms, which require community-led design and decision-making.

“It is unacceptable that preventable vision loss continues at this scale. Our communities deserve early intervention, culturally safe eye exams, and free or affordable glasses from children through to Elders. We are answering the call our communities have made for years, and we want to see governments meet that call with us.”

Sector Partners Backing First Nations Leadership

Optometry Australia President Theo Charalambous said strengthening access to timely, culturally safe optometry is essential.

“Optometry Australia is proud to work alongside FNEHA to address refractive error in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Improving investment in eye examinations, enabling access to subsidised glasses, and ensuring access to eye health services — such as those delivered through the Visiting Optometrists Scheme — is vital. We are urging governments to partner with First Nations organisations to make these improvements a reality.”

The Fred Hollows Foundation’s Country Director for the Indigenous Australia Program, Tanya Morris, highlighted the importance of community-led approaches.

“As an ally, we’re standing with First Nations communities and FNEHA, who’ve been clear about what needs to change. The solutions are known — what’s needed now is genuine government follow-through. We’re calling for real action to remove the barriers that still limit access to culturally safe, timely eye care. Our communities deserve nothing less.”

A Call to Government and Community

The partnership is urging governments across Australia to take decisive action to improve eye health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This includes:

- Growing the First Nations eye health workforce
- Prioritising ACCHO-led and community-led access to regular eye checks
- Strengthening screening programs and early intervention efforts,
- Ensuring all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can access free or affordable prescription glasses.

The partnership is also encouraging community members to prioritise their eye health.

“One simple eye test can change someone’s life,” Mr Tatipata said. “If you or your family haven’t had your eyes checked recently, now is the time.”

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