

# THE FRED HOLLOWES FOUNDATION INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIA PROGRAM

## Telehealth Information Sheet 3: What is The Foundation's interest in telehealth to date?

June 2018



## WHY TELEHEALTH?

The Foundation recognises the gap in eye health between patients living in regional and remote Australia and their counterparts in urban locations. Blindness rates in Indigenous Australians are still much higher than in other Australians, and most blindness is due to preventable or treatable causes of vision loss: cataract, diabetes, refractive error and trachoma<sup>1</sup>. Adequate provision of accessible eye care services is a key element required to redress this inequality and “close the gap” for vision loss in Australia.

## The Foundation's involvement to date

### Nganampa Health Council (NHC) Eye Health Coordination Project

The Foundation funded the Eye Health Coordination Project to increase access to eye health care for Anangu on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands, in the remote north west of South Australia. The Foundation provided \$455,000 to NHC, an Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation delivering primary health care to all Anangu on the APY Lands, for three years of operation from 2015 to 2017.



Funding was provided for the employment of a full time eye health nurse; use of improved e-health systems; purchase and use of a retinal camera; and enhanced coordination and integration with NHC's chronic disease and environmental health programs.

Although not primarily a telehealth project, there are number of lessons of relevance when considering the telehealth space. An evaluation was undertaken of the Project's results and impacts, which found the overall Project model (the Lands based nurse working in collaboration with relevant NHC staff and visiting teams, the retinal imaging system and the increased focus on triaging and targeting clients most in need) has achieved increasing coverage rates in visual acuity, diabetic retinopathy examination and trachoma screening<sup>2</sup>. Lessons of interest include:

- Triage of results and moving away from the majority of adult clients attending visiting clinics being seen by both an optometrist and ophthalmologist;
- Visiting ophthalmologists focusing their visit time on clients most in need of ophthalmic attention and/or on laser and other eye treatments;
- The future possibility of the eye health nurse being supported and trained to screen retinal images, with only images of concern being referred for remote assessment.

The use of telehealth in the remote community context has real potential to support the successful application of these lessons, leading to a more targeted, relevant and efficient service being provided to communities.

### **Lions Eye Institute**

The Lions Eye Institute delivers high quality outreach specialist eye care services to regional and remote communities in the Goldfields, Pilbara and Kimberley regions of Western Australia (WA). The Lions Eye Institute's Outback Vision Program has developed and implemented innovative and sustainable outreach models of eye care and is the primary provider of specialist eye care services in these regions. The Foundation has an ongoing partnership that contributes to the work of LEI and reflects The Foundation's commitment to geographically expanding its programming across Australia, to end avoidable blindness and improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's health.

The Lions Eye Institute recommends an expanded scope to support optometrists and regional hospitals in leading telehealth for eye care for these benefits<sup>3</sup>:

1. Access: improving equitable access to specialist eye services
2. Quality: supporting best practice and better outcomes for patients
3. Cost-effectiveness: reducing Patient Assistance Transport Scheme (PATs) visits to urban ophthalmologists
4. Productivity: optimising the output of outreach service visits

A recent audit<sup>4</sup> by the Lions Eye Institute of optometry-facilitated teleophthalmology found that it is a valuable adjunct to regional outreach ophthalmology services, providing patients with increased access to specialist care for a wide range of ophthalmic conditions, and more efficient access to surgical care.

### **TEAMSnet**

The Foundation supported a 4-year research project (2012-2016) which sought to improve prevention, detection, management and treatment of diabetic eye diseases, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The project intended to develop and test innovative internet and mobile technologies to provide low-cost retinal imaging and assist coordinated diabetes and cardiovascular care for Indigenous communities at the primary health care level.

Project partners included: Central Australia Aboriginal Congress, Wurli-Wurlinjang Health Service (Katherine), and Miwatj Health Aboriginal Cooperation (East Arnhem Land), Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory, the University of Sydney, the University of Melbourne, the South Australia Health and Medical Research Institute (SAHMRI), and the Centre for Eye Research Australia.

Funders: The Fred Hollows Foundation was the primary funder with support from the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC). It was hoped TEAMSnet would 'play a vital role in ensuring we get to remote patients before it is too late<sup>5</sup>.'

The TEAMSnet project faced several challenges and implementation delays, including delays in staff recruitment by the sites and high staff turnover, technology delays in testing and rolling out a new technology, and staff engagement challenges, particularly at Wurli-Wurlinjang and Miwatj around the change in practice required for retinal imaging and internet connectivity<sup>6</sup>.

### **Submissions and letters of support**

The Fred Hollows Foundation made a submission in May 2015 to the Medical Services Advisory Committee to support the approval of an MBS item number for



non-mydratric retinal imaging in patients with diabetes by primary health care practitioners.

In December 2014 the Fred Hollows Foundation provided a letter of support for a project proposed by Flinders University of South Australia 'Telehealth – Closing the gap in diabetic retinopathy for rural and remote Australians'.

## The Foundation's 2018 telehealth information sheet series

Building upon the learnings gained from these earlier activities, The Foundation now wishes to explore:

- For whom and in which circumstances telehealth could be a cost-effective, real-time and convenient alternative to more traditional face-to-face way of delivery eye care to underserviced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia, and
- How telehealth would work to improve patients' eye health outcomes.

This series aims to provide access to evidence of 'what works' and fill a knowledge gap, to spark meaningful discussion internally and with partners.

The information sheets are being prepared by an external consultant in collaboration with the Indigenous Australia Program.

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*This is a live document and any corrections, additions or other feedback is most appreciated.*

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### References

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- <sup>2</sup> Sironis Health (2018) Final Evaluation Report: Nganampa Health Council: Eye Health Coordination Project Evaluation
- <sup>3</sup> Lions Eye Institute (2014) Increasing the impact of telehealth for eye care in rural and remote Western Australia
- <sup>4</sup> Barntick et al (2018) Optometry-facilitated teleophthalmology: an audit of the first year in Western Australia *Clinical and Experimental Optometry* <https://first-year-in-western-australia.pdf>
- <sup>5</sup> Brian Doolan  
<http://www.healthinonet.ecu.edu.au/about/news/911>
- <sup>6</sup> Laima Brazionis, Alicia Jenkins, Anthony Keech, Chris Ryan, Sven-Erik Bursell (2017) 'An evaluation of the telehealth facilitation of diabetes and cardiovascular care in remote Australian Indigenous communities: protocol for the telehealth eye and associated medical services network [TEAMSnet] project, a pre-post study design', *BMC Health Services Research*, DOI 10.1186/s12913-016-1967-4, [healthinonet.ecu.edu.au](http://healthinonet.ecu.edu.au)

