



Transcript

Preventing vision loss from diabetic retinopathy: advice from an Australian optometrist

SAM BURROW: Hello and welcome to our first HealthInfo podcast. Our aim is to bring useful evidence, ideas, and information to people who work in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health sector. We'd like to begin by acknowledging the Traditional Custodians of the land our offices are located on, the Whadjuk Nyoongar people, and we pay our respects to all Elders across Australia, past, present, and future. We'd also like to thank the Fred Hollows Foundation and Lions Outback Vision for making it possible for us to bring you the first two episodes of our new podcast. In these episodes, we catch up with Sinead Denny and Kerry Woods at their offices at Lions Outback Vision in Perth to talk about Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander eye health. My name is Sam Burrow. I'm a Senior Research Officer at the Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet, and I'm here with my colleague Mikayla Hollows who conducted the interviews with Sinead and Kerry. Mikayla catches up with Sinead here, but be sure to also have a listen to the second episode in our podcast when she catches up with Kerry Woods, who is the Aboriginal Eye Health Coordinator for Lions Outback Vision. Hello Mikayla.

MIKAYLA HOLLOWS: Hi everyone. As Sam just mentioned, my name is Mikayla and I am a Nyoongar woman and Research Officer at the Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet. Today we'll be chatting about a serious eye problem which can develop in people with diabetes. It's called diabetic retinopathy. Diabetic retinopathy, or DR for short, can lead to vision loss and blindness among our mob with diabetes. To find out more about DR, I had a yarn with Sinead Denny from Lions Outback Vision, or LOV. Sinead is an optometrist and the diabetic screening coordinator for LOV in Western Australia and she is passionate about providing access to eyecare. Chatting with Sinead, we learned about some of the outreach work being done to address the eye health of people living in rural and remote communities in Western Australia. We also delved into diabetic retinopathy: what it is, why it's important and what Lions Outback Vision is doing about it. He Sinead's answers to my questions.

MIKAYLA: So I'll just start off with the first question. So can you tell us a little bit about the Lions Outback Vision and your role in the delivery of eye care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

SINEAD DENNY: Sure. So my role is actually coordinating the diabetic retinopathy screening for the State. So what diabetic screening involves is measuring vision, taking photos of the backs of people's eyes and people that are diabetic to detect diabetic eye disease. My

role is also to educate and train Aboriginal Health Workers, nurses and GPs to perform the diabetic retinal screening to help deliver eyecare services for their community.

MIKAYLA: Awesome. Can you just tell us what is DR?

SINEAD: So diabetic retinopathy is an eye disease which can develop in anyone with diabetes. It can lead to vision loss and blindness if not picked up early.

MIKAYLA: Great. So why is it important for primary healthcare providers to know about it?

SINEAD: So the eyes are usually an area that is easily overlooked, but diabetic retinopathy can cause significant vision loss and blindness if not picked up on diabetic retinal screening. So diabetic retinopathy can even cause damage in the eyes before people are diagnosed with diabetes or have any vision problems. It is important for primary healthcare providers to know about it as diabetic retinopathy, the is now the leading cause of preventable vision loss in the working age population.

MIKAYLA: So, how does DR occur?

SINEAD: So, diabetic retinopathy causes damage to the small blood vessels in the retina at the back of the eye. This occurs due to high blood sugar levels causing changes in the flow of blood to the eye and leaking of blood from those small vessels into the retina. So, due to this lack of oxygen, new blood vessels can actually start to grow which are weak and they cause more leakage and fluid buildup and retinal detachment can therefore occur.

MIKAYLA: Great. So who does get DR?

SINEAD: So anyone with type one or type two diabetes is at risk of developing diabetic retinopathy with a one-in-three chance of getting the disease. The longer you have diabetes, the more likely it is that you will develop diabetic retinopathy. If you develop high blood pressure and blood cholesterol, the risk of developing diabetic retinopathy is also higher. Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people are three times more likely to get diabetic retinopathy.

MIKAYLA: Great. So are there any ways that you can prevent DR?

SINEAD: So prevention is always the key and includes most importantly controlling blood sugar levels. Controlling your blood pressure, and also blood cholesterol levels play an important role in preventing diabetic retinopathy. So healthy eating, quitting smoking and exercise are also really important. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with diabetes should have yearly retinal eye screening exams to reduce the risk of vision loss.

MIKAYLA: So how do you know if someone does have DR?

SINEAD: So in the early stages of diabetic retinopathy, sometimes there are no symptoms, which is why yearly retinal diabetic eye exams are so important. Diabetic retinal photos are the only way you can actually tell if someone has diabetic retinopathy. Other clues can include vision loss or disturbance, such as spots or fluctuating blurred vision.

MIKAYLA: Awesome. So, how would you treat it?

SINEAD: So firstly, diabetic retinopathy can be treated by things like diet modifications and better control of blood sugar levels. If diabetic retinopathy progresses, surgical intervention may be required. This includes laser to the retina, which actually seals up the damaged leaky blood vessels inside the eye, which has been the mainstay of treatment. Up until more recently, other treatments have become more available that provide longer term improvement in vision. This includes medications that are given by injection into the eye to slow the leaking of fluid from the blood vessels in the eye.

MIKAYLA: Great. So what services are offered at Lions Outback to tackle DR?

SINEAD: So my role allows me to work closely with remote communities all over the State to help train, educate and share knowledge to facilitate local diabetic retinal screening clinics. So for example, if a patient has been picked up by local retinal screening programs and diagnosed with diabetic retinopathy, they're then referred onto the Lions Outback Vision van which has an eye specialist on board when we are next in town. If that's not soon enough, our dedicated specialists travel on special outreach clinic to deliver surgeries and clinics in between that. Lions Outback Vision also has a visiting optometry service which deliver eye health checks and glasses to over 30 communities across the Kimberley, Pilbara and Midwest regions of Western Australia. So I think it's safe to say we are onboard to tackling diabetic retinopathy.

MIKAYLA: Thank you Sinead for joining me. It was fascinating to learn more about diabetic retinopathy and the impact it has on our mob with diabetes. To everyone out there listening, don't forget to check out our second episode with Kerry Woods, who is the Aboriginal Eye Health Coordinator for Lions Outback Vision. Kerry tells us what it's like to travel on the Vision Van, delivering eye care to rural and remote communities in Western Australia.

SAM: Thanks Mikayla, and if you're after more information about diabetic retinopathy or other aspects of eye health, why not visit [our eye health portal](#)? It's an online collection of heaps of information and resources about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander eye health, which you can find at www.eyehealth.org.au. There you'll find featured knowledge exchange products that include a series of multimedia resources about diabetic retinopathy that were co-designed and developed by the HealthInfoNet and the Fred Hollows Foundation. There's a key fact sheet, an infographic, a short animated video, a PowerPoint presentation, and a webinar. These resources have been designed to help healthcare providers who are tackling diabetic retinopathy in Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander health services. Thanks again to the Fred Hollows Foundation and Lions Outback Vision for the great collaboration and thanks to all of you for listening. Until next time.