

## HAVE YOU ASKED THE QUESTION?

**“Are You  
of Aboriginal or  
Torres Strait Islander  
Origin?”**



### AtQ INFORMATION SHEET

## Improving Eye Care Service Delivery with Appropriate Identification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Status

### Why is identification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status important in the delivery of eye care services?

There has been much progress in reducing the eye health gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and other Australians over the past decade<sup>1,2,3</sup>, however a number of eye health inequities and outcomes continue to exist. An estimated 94% of vision loss among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples is preventable and treatable, though barriers of access to and utilisation of services remain. These are reflected in lower rates of eye examinations and treatments, and inequitable waiting times compared with other Australians.

The identification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status can have a significant positive impact for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander eye health outcomes, enhance cultural safety, and ensure that patients can access appropriate pathways to care. Additionally, improving reporting and monitoring of access to eye health services through identification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status is an essential step to close the gap for vision.

### What can be achieved by appropriately identifying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status in the delivery of eye care services?

‘Asking the question’ and appropriately recording patient status can help achieve the following:

- Increased and improved provision of culturally appropriate services and care
- Improved utilisation of targeted services that are specifically designed to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (e.g. subsidised spectacle schemes, prioritisation for cataract surgery, specific Medicare rebates or funding) or offer Aboriginal specific service options (e.g. access to Aboriginal hospital liaison officer or Aboriginal health worker)
- In some cases, clinical guidelines vary between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and other Australians, for example the frequency of retinal screening for people with diabetes (annually for Aboriginal patients, once every two years for other patients)
- Improved data and evidence to assist in eye service planning and delivery
- Improved monitoring of inequity in access to and utilisation of eye health services (e.g. uptake of glasses, diabetic retinopathy treatment, cataract surgery) to allow accurate identification of the extent of the problem, guide measures to address the issue and oversee progress

### Asking the question: “Are you of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Origin?”

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare<sup>4</sup> recommends the use of a standard national question to identify, record and report the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status of patients of health services:

**“Are you of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Origin?”**

The standard Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status question should be asked of all individuals to establish their Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or non-Indigenous status.

'Asking the question' ensures that everyone, whether Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or other Australians has the right to self-report their Indigenous status, rather than have their status assumed and recorded on their behalf.

An individual's right not to identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander must be respected. Personal, historical, family or cultural reasons may influence an individual's decision to identify.

Establishing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status by 'asking the question' using the above wording is recommended best-practice by a number of key medical and health organisations, including the Australian Indigenous Doctors Association<sup>5</sup> and the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners<sup>6</sup>, who identify this as a key element in establishing cultural safety in mainstream practices. Strengthening cultural safety across the health system is an element of both The Roadmap to Close the Gap for Vision<sup>7</sup>, and Vision 2020 Australia's Strong Eyes, Strong Communities plan<sup>8</sup>.

### What can be done to improve identification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status in the delivery of eye care services?

All health services can support appropriate identification of patients in the following ways:

- Display resources promoting identification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as an ongoing prompt to ensure 'the question' continues to be asked
- Ensure 'the question' is a mandatory field in patient information forms
- Promote identification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples by creating a welcoming environment e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags, displaying artwork, displaying promotional materials such as posters and having brochures available
- Establish processes to record Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status in clinical software. This information should be routinely recorded in clinic information systems and be consistent across administration and clinical systems e.g. in referral letters
- Provide training to staff on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identification issues and cultural safety, including culturally appropriate methods for 'asking the question'

### For further information, training and a list of available resources to support identification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, visit Indigenous Eye Health (IEH) website [www.iehu.unimelb.edu.au](http://www.iehu.unimelb.edu.au)

- IEH has developed a 'toblerone' (or 'tent' shaped) desktop resource\* that can be used on a reception desk as a simple prompt to ensure 'the question' is asked. It can be accessed on IEH website [www.iehu.unimelb.edu.au](http://www.iehu.unimelb.edu.au)
- IEH encourages local community adaptations of the 'toblerone' desktop resource\* and development of other resources to prompt and support 'asking the question'
- Refer to your local Aboriginal organisation for further support, information and training on cultural safety and 'asking the question'

#### \*Acknowledgment:

Indigenous Eye Health, University of Melbourne has used with permission the existing wording and artwork from the 'Have you Asked the Question?' Joint project by North East Healthy Communities (previously North East Primary Care Partnership) and Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS)<sup>9</sup>.

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