

## **Optometry WA and the Reconciliation Action Plan process:**

**We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land in which we live and work on here in WA, we pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.**

This is statement (or similar) often heard and repeated but, stated without understanding and sincerity, it is worthless.

We have a strong history in OWA of engaging with and providing services for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Individual optometrists also do so through the Visiting Optometrist Scheme (VOS) run by Rural Health West for the Commonwealth Department of Health and through outreach services from or in our own practices.

The board of Optometry WA has agreed to explore a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) to become more inclusive and supportive of our Aboriginal communities. We understand that it will take generations for true healing and acceptance to occur. It is our belief that all people and communities in WA will benefit from a process of cultural awareness, acceptance of the past, awareness of present unconscious bias and racism and a mutual path forward for better futures.

To this end Optometry WA has formed a committee to investigate the Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) process and we hope to bring along as many practitioners, staff and family with us as feel comfortable with the journey.

My name is Gary Cerie and along with Andrew Nguyen and Christine Baker we form the OWA RAP committee.

We hope as an organisation to have completed an Innovate RAP in the next two years. With your indulgence over future months we will provide some ongoing cultural awareness information that may help you in your practices and in your communities.

### **In this article we address:**

- **Why are we undertaking a RAP for the organisation?**
- **Reconciliation as an important step to equal access to health care**
- **What is Reconciliation?**
- **How does that relate to OWA and Optometrists?**

### **Why are we undertaking a RAP for the organisation?**

There is a gap in the health and vision outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people when compared to the rest of the community.

Part of the reason is that they do not have access to, or feel comfortable accessing optometric services

“Closing the Gap acknowledges the ongoing strength and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in sustaining the world’s oldest living cultures”

<https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/>

“Vision loss is the equal-third leading cause of the gap in health after heart disease and diabetes (and) ahead of trauma, stroke and alcoholism. Indigenous adults have **six times more blindness** than mainstream adult.

Even mild vision loss (<6/12) increases risk of dying by 2.6 X in mainland Australia...

Mild vision loss prevents healthy daily living

Vision is responsible for 11% of years of life lost to disability

94% of vision loss is (preventable).

*“Closing the gap for Vision2020 (IEHU – University of Melbourne)”*

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have:

- 3 x Diabetes compared to non-indigenous population
- 35% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people have never had an eye test

And yet preventable vision loss is predominantly

- Uncorrected prescription (80%)
- Cataracts
- Diabetic retinopathy
- Trachoma (1-2%)

These are all areas that we, as optometrists, can directly treat or triage for effective and quick remedies. Working with our Ophthalmological colleagues we can effectively refer to maximise their time and skills.

“A pair of glasses or cataract surgery can eliminate vision loss overnight, whereas other chronic diseases (diabetes, heart disease, alcoholism) cannot be reversed overnight.”

*CTGV20202 report 2012*

### **We believe that Reconciliation is an important step in equalising health care access.**

In Australia we embrace our multi-cultural society –we embrace different languages, cultures and heritage and yet we probably know very little of the languages, differences and cultural strengths of our Aboriginal heritage. We, as humans of differing ethnicity and culture have more in common than differences and yet we don't always understand each other in a way that allows us to live harmoniously and for a common future.

There is increased societal awareness of inter-generational trauma- we have seen the actions of churches and government agencies brought under the spotlight with respect to children taken from their families and wrongfully told that they were unloved orphans. Royal Commissions have exposed foul practices and treatment of minors and ordered compensation.

We recognise that some people's interaction with Australia's First Nation people (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders) may be negative and there are stereotypical views held by both non-indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders alike. How do we see each other with respect and as equals?

## **What is Reconciliation?**

**At its heart, reconciliation is about strengthening relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous peoples, for the benefit of all Australians.**

**“... A reconciled Australia is one where our rights as First Australians are not just respected but championed in all the places that matter ...”**

**Kirstie Parker – Board Member, Reconciliation Australia**

## **The process of Reconciliation**

“Our vision of reconciliation is based and measured on five dimensions: historical acceptance; race relations; equality and equity; institutional integrity and unity.

**In a just, equitable and reconciled Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children will have the same life chances and choices as non-Indigenous children, and the length and quality of a person’s life will not be determined by their racial background.”**

*Reconciliation Australia website*

## **How does that relate to OWA and Optometrists?**

When we speak with peak Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups and with Government Departments – having a RAP lets them know we know the Australian history and respect their culture and right to determine and manage their health outcomes. When our practitioners are aware and can relate to the RAP process we are more likely to be able to assist local families.

We are seeking an Aboriginal representative also to be on our committee as we seek to bridge divides between our cultures and make our community and practices safe and welcoming to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

## **How can I get involved?**

Please feel free to contact Gary Cerie ([g.cerie@optometry.org.au](mailto:g.cerie@optometry.org.au)), Christine Baker ([christine@eyesonoxford.com.au](mailto:christine@eyesonoxford.com.au)) or Andrew Nguyen ([a.nguyen@optometry.org.au](mailto:a.nguyen@optometry.org.au)) to discuss any issues in relation to the proposed Reconciliation Action Plan or providing services to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.