

World Sight Day: an international day of awareness of avoidable blindness

Focus was on family history of eye disease and increased risk

Thirteenth of October was World Sight Day, an international day of awareness around the global of avoidable blindness and impairment.

In addition to supporting the work of members, Vision 2020 Australia undertook a variety of activities including a national advocacy campaign sent to all federal and state parliamentarians containing messages, a World Sight Day to wear on the day and two case studies: John Egglestone, a 71 year old Victorian man with glaucoma and David Davis, a 66 year old Cambodian man who received sight-restoring surgery as a result of work by Vision 2020 Australia Global.

There was no global theme this year. Vision 2020 Australia used the focus on family history and increased risk if a serious eye condition such as glaucoma or age-related macular degeneration exists in family history for the Vision 2020 program.

A media picture opportunity was held in Melbourne's Parliament Gardens on the day with the health minister David Davis. The minister was pictured with three dogs-in-training from Guide Dogs Victoria as well as a powerful message.

Ayşe Bavage, 38, was diagnosed with glaucoma when she was 28 and was unaware until recently of how glaucoma featured in her family. Her mother, grandmother, aunt and her second cousin all had glaucoma making her two young children more likely to develop the disease. Ayşe's story is a critical reminder about the importance of regular eye tests to sight.

Annually the direct cost of eye disease in 2009 is estimated at \$2.98 billion. In Victoria, costs are estimated at \$652 million, approximately a quarter of the total cost," Mr Davis said.

Improving eye sight can improve quality of life. To be as healthy as we need a strong focus on eye health," he said.



Ayşe Bavage, Emma and Jack Bavage, David Davis and Jan Fild with the three guide dogs

Vision 2020 Australia also distributed a media release to print, television, radio, online and eye-health media. The media release encouraged people to start talking about eye health with their parents and grandparents as having all the facts is a powerful tool when it comes to tackling vision loss and blindness.

Radio interviews were also given with several different stations including: ABC 666 in Canberra, ABC 774 in Melbourne, Radio National's 'Life Matters' program, and Vision Australia's 'Talking Vision' program.

Activity conducted by Vision 2020 members included the World Sight Day Challenge, radio broadcasts, various articles published in member publications, segments on national television promoting the key messages, and fund-raising events.

A survey commissioned by Vision 2020 Australia found only 22 per cent of Victorians polled were aware that serious eye conditions such as age-

related macular degeneration and glaucoma were part of their family history. In contrast, nearly twice that many people knew there was a family history of heart disease.

"The family history awareness figures revealed by the Newspoll are alarming. Research indicates that the number of people aware of family history should be much higher," Associate Professor Ecosse Lamoureux from the Centre for Eye Research Australia, said.

Vision 2020 Australia chief executive officer Jennifer Gersbeck said the risk of getting serious eye conditions such as AMD or glaucoma increases dramatically if there is a family history.

"If you have a relative with macular degeneration, you have a fifty per cent chance of developing the disease yourself, while those with a parent with glaucoma are more than eight times more likely to develop the disease," Ms Gersbeck said.

"And what's worse, for those people who are over the age of 40, the risk of developing any eye condition is even higher," she said.

Ms Gersbeck said while there was a perception that heart attacks were more debilitating than low vision or blindness, many people did not stop to think about what life would be like if they could not see.

The good news is more than 75 per cent of vision loss is preventable and treatable.

Vision 2020 Australia chairman Dr Barry Jones, has glaucoma and says the best defence against many of the main eye conditions is regular eye examinations.

"By detecting eye problems early it's possible for many people to save their sight, reduce the effects of eye disease, or maintain a level of vision which enables people to maintain their independence and carry out many of the daily tasks of life," Dr Jones said.