

INDIGENOUS ACCESS TO EYE HEALTH AND VISION CARE IN CANADA: **A public health imperative**

Indigenous Canadians, particularly those living in rural and remote areas, experience a number of barriers to accessing optometric care. These access issues are the result of many factors, including inadequate transportation, financial constraints, and a lack of on-reserve care.¹ Research commissioned by the CNIB found **one-third of Indigenous people have not had an eye examination within the last two years.**² The lack of equitable access to eye health and vision care for Indigenous Canadians should be a public health imperative.



IMPACT of inequitable access to eye health and vision care

- Canada is behind the United States and Australia in developing eye health and vision care services for Indigenous peoples.³
- Research shows that Indigenous children experience high levels of astigmatism along with high levels of uncorrected refractive error and poor compliance with wearing glasses.⁴
- Over the last two decades, the percentage of Canada's Indigenous population living with diabetes increased to 20%⁵, putting them at increased risk of diabetic retinopathy leading to vision loss.
- Indigenous Canadians with permanent and severe vision loss lack access to rehabilitation services in their communities.

There is a growing public health crisis in the delivery of vision care services to Indigenous communities. Barriers to care must be reduced, and new models of in-community services developed with engagement of Indigenous peoples. Optometrists practice across Canada and are well-positioned to provide care to Indigenous peoples close to where they live.



SWIFT ACTION REQUIRED to address eye health and vision care for Canada's Indigenous People

- Improve access to care by:
 - Establishing community-based and culturally appropriate prevention strategies that include a diabetic retinopathy program.
 - Providing timely access to quality, in-person optometric care for all Indigenous Canadians, particularly those living in rural and remote areas.
 - Considering new approaches and enhanced care components to address vision care needs of those impacted by Health Canada's Non-Insured Health Benefits Program (NIHB).
- Educate the public by:
 - Promoting the value of comprehensive eye exams to prevent vision loss and promote eye health through a public awareness campaign.
- Build a pan-Canadian Framework for Action, coordinated by a Vision Desk at PHAC, that:
 - Is patient-centered and ensures access to the right eye health provider at the right time.
 - Promotes national vision health guidelines including regular, comprehensive in-person eye exams.
 - Approaches eye health as a population health priority and encourages its integration into the preventive health care routine.
- Fund research on Indigenous peoples' eye health, notably diabetes and models for access to care.

REFERENCES >

