Tackling the blindness crisis in PNG



Invest $26.4 million over 4 years to tackle the blindness crisis in PNG

Papua New Guinea (PNG) has one of the highest rates of blindness in the world with an estimated 860,000 people with vision loss – 61% of whom are women.

The main causes are:

- Untreated cataracts which can be removed with low cost, sight saving surgery;
- Uncorrected refractive error which can be corrected with the right pair of glasses (which two out of three people do not have access to); and
- a high rate of poorly managed diabetes, leading to diabetic retinopathy, which if left untreated will lead to severe vision loss or blindness. This is preventable through early detection and treatment.

Vision impairment or blindness has a direct impact on a person's ability to engage in work, education, self-care, and development – undermining efforts to engage in social and economic mobility. Investing in proven and cost-effective interventions to prevent and treat blindness, such as cataract surgery, opens the door to opportunity and prosperity and reduces the disabling impact of impairment.

In line with our development partnership with PNG, Australia should support the PNG healthcare system and its critical eye care services, disrupted through COVID19, to ensure that the 90% of vision loss that can be prevented and treated is.

This investment will develop the workforce and enhance remote service delivery to address the current burden of vision loss and prevent escalating rates of avoidable blindness due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The priority areas, identified by the PNG National Department of Health (and with an investment from the New Zealand Government of $16 million), include:

- **Immediate investment in remote service delivery** so that up to 160,000 people per year have their sight restored and can reach their full potential; and
- **The establishment of a sustainable purpose-built Centre of Excellence** to train 24 local ophthalmologists and 4 optometrists as well as ophthalmic clinicians, community health workers and existing staff. This means the good work undertaken immediately can be sustained over the long term.

This proposal will leverage the deep expertise, resources, and local connections of Vision 2020 Australia members. Strong bilateral relations with PNG, extensive sector knowledge and experience, coupled with reliable data about the current challenges means we know where the gaps in eye health are and already have some of the key underpinnings for success. We can hit the ground running and have an immediate and sustainable impact on vision loss in PNG when it is appropriate to do so.

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SETTING AUSTRALIA'S SIGHTS