

Seeing a better Australia

Why vision is a first-order disability issue

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The baby boom generation has gifted much to the Australian nation including 25 years of unbroken prosperity as measured by quarterly growth in GDP. Although to be fair other generations have also contributed mightily to the common wealth of Australia. But now aged 54-72 the boomers are straddling retirement and in many cases they're also navigating wellness issues including the onset of age-related macular degeneration.

A study completed by the Australian Institute of Health & Welfare (2005) estimated that 9.4 per cent of the then Over-55 population (of 4.6 million) suffered from vision impairment and that 1.2 per cent were blind. These proportions applied to 2018 populations deliver 639,000 older Australians with vision impairment including 82,000 who are blind (see Table).

Project these proportions to the 2028 Over-55 population (of 8.5 million) and the numbers swell to 799,000 with vision impairment including 102,000 defined as blind.

Estimates for the broader population derived from the ABS Survey of Disability, Ageing & Carers (2015) by Vision Australia place the combined blind and vision impaired population at 409,000 currently,

or at 1.6 per cent of the total population, rising to 539,000 or 1.9 per cent within a decade.

There are a couple of issues with regard to the data. At a general level about 2 per cent of broader population might be described as having severe vision impairment in Australia. This proportion and number will rise over the coming decade as the population ages and as age-related macular degeneration affects the baby boomer population now pushing into the 60s and 70s.

The ageing issue impacting vision in Australia also applies globally although in many developing nations the problems are exacerbated by the prevalence of un-operated cataracts.

The World Health Organisation citing research recently published in *The Lancet* (2017) estimates that globally there are 36 million people who are blind and a further 217 million who have Moderate to Severe Visual Impairment (MSVI). Another 189 million are classified as having Moderate Visual Impairment (MVI) and 1,095 million are estimated to have functional presbyopia.

Putting together all categories of vision impairment results in an estimate of 1.5 billion of the world's 7.3 billion people as having some form of vision impairment. This translates into about one person in five.

The overall causes of vision impairment are dominated by the same issues worldwide, including in Australia, namely cataract, age-related macular degeneration, glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy and uncorrected refractive error (URE). Severe vision

impairment in Australia is directly correlated with ageing. And so as the baby boomers age, so too will the requirement for vision support and funding.

The figures are quite confronting. Australia's population is expected to increase by 16 per cent over the decade to 2028 but the Over-55 population is expected to jump by 29 per cent. Instead of assisting an estimated 82,000 blind Australians aged Over 55 today the number in 10 years will be 102,000. The blind aged as a cohort is right now expanding by around 1,000 per year and will continue on this trajectory for another generation.

The Royal Society for the Blind in South Australia, as well as other support organisations and programs such as the NDIS, are critical to the effective management of vision impairment in Australia. And in this regard it particularly pleasing to see RSB (SA) pick up Gold in the 2018 good Design Australia Awards for the group's Ideas and Innovation Hub co-designed with Business Models Inc.

The next decade and indeed the decade beyond will be challenging in terms of securing the funding and the support needed to deliver the care required by our ageing society. But it will also be important to ensure that all groups, including the Over-55s, the indigenous, young Australians, and the recently arrived, all receive the vision care that they need to ensure that we're all Seeing a Better Australia.

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Scoping the Vision Issue: Estimates of Vision Impairment in Australia, 2004 - 2028

		2004	2018	2028
Total Population	(m)	19.9	25.0	29.0
Blind or Low Vision	No.	-	409,000	539,000
	%	-	1.6	1.9
Blind Over-55s	No.	56,000	82,000	102,000
	%	1.2	1.2	1.2
Vision Impairment Over-55s	No.	444,000	639,000	799,000
	%	9.4	9.4	9.4

Source: Australian Institute of Health & Welfare 2005; Australian Bureau of Statistics Survey of Disability, Ageing & Carers 2015; The Demographics Group