More than 500,000 Australians over 40 live with some form of vision impairment, with numbers expected to reach 800,000 by 2020.^{1} Eighty per cent of vision loss is preventable, yet it is the leading cause of age-related disability. Correctable refractive error is excluded from these discussions of vision impairment.

Among Australians aged 40 and older in 2009, the major causes of vision impairment were age-related macular degeneration (AMD), cataracts, diabetic retinopathy, and glaucoma as presented in Figure 1.^{2,3} The major causes of blindness are presented in Figure 2, with half the cases attributable to AMD.\(^1\)\(^3\)

AMD affects around 500,000 Australians of whom 100,000 have significant vision loss.\(^4\) In the absence of treatment and prevention efforts, the number of people with late stage macular degeneration disease (vision loss) could double from 167,000 to 330,000 by the year 2030.\(^5\)

In 2010, the total economic cost of vision loss associated with AMD was in excess of $5 billion. This includes health system costs, other costs to individuals and community, and loss of wellbeing. For every $1 invested in the current treatment for wet AMD, there has been a $2 saving in social benefit costs.\(^5\)

**Impact of vision loss**

Vision loss has a snowball effect on the health and wellbeing of older people, families, caregivers, and society.\(^6\)

Higher absenteeism, premature retirement, and premature death are all more common outcomes among those with vision loss.\(^2\) People whose vision deteriorated from “normal” to blindness were nearly three-times more likely to need skilled nursing and be admitted to long-term care facilities.\(^2\)

People with long-term low vision or blindness are:

- Twice as likely to experience falls
- Twice as likely to experience reduced social independence
- Three times as likely to be depressed
- Four times as likely to be unemployed
- Four to eight times at risk of hip fractures
- Admitted to nursing homes three years earlier, on average.\(^4\)

Depression rates amongst carers aged 65 years and older of someone with wet AMD are more than triple those in the general population\(^7\) while carers aged under 70 report even higher rates of depression, with one in nine suffering from the condition.\(^4\)
The facts on vision impairment and loss

In Australia in 2009 the total cost of all vision loss including uncorrected refractive error was $16.6 billion, a cost of $16,360 per person aged over 40. Loss of well-being was responsible for 57 per cent of costs, with health system and productivity costs contributing 18 and 14 per cent respectively.\(^3\)

**Lack of national services**

Australia has no national services for people 65 and older who are blind or vision impaired. In spite of exciting advances in treatment such as bionic eye implants, nanosecond lasers and vision regeneration, older Australians continue to miss out on integrated models of care and prevention that could halt or reduce their vision loss.\(^1\)

Older Australians with severe vision loss face significant out of pocket costs for specialists, allied health services and technologies. In contrast, the Hearing Services Program provides free testing and hearing aids for concession card holders and Australians aged under 65 years with vision loss are supported through disability packages.\(^8,9\)

**Inconsistent access to support and services**

Inconsistent access to Home and Community Care (HACC) and Home Care services and technologies leave many older Australians unable to access visual supports, in spite of significant improvements in daily activities and functions associated with their use. Although non-government organisations attempt to fill this void, most require co-contributions and are unable to meet all requests for assistance.\(^10\)

Reading, vision and orientation technologies such as computer screen scanners, text readers, smart phones and tablets are expensive for people on fixed incomes, including pensioners. However the use of such technologies delivers cost-effective benefits for independent living and reduces health co-morbidities.\(^11\)

Subsidised assistive technologies are urgently required; for people at risk of, and living with, severe vision loss.\(^10\)

---