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MEDIA RELEASE

Ita's plea to older Australians: Don't let Coronavirus fears steal your vision

Australian icon Ita Buttrose has issued a passionate plea to senior Australians in a bid to avoid thousands of people going unnecessarily blind during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Today, I have an important message for our older and more vulnerable Australians living with macular disease, including age-related macular degeneration (AMD), the leading cause of blindness and severe vision loss in Australia," Ms Buttrose said.

"I'm concerned many people who need urgent, sight-saving eye injections for diseases like wet (neovascular) AMD and diabetic macular edema are not keeping their appointments with their ophthalmologists because of fear and confusion around public health protocols.

"Missing an eye injection can seriously and permanently compromise your vision. You must not miss your sight-saving treatment.

"Many of you will know that I have been Patron of Macular Disease Foundation Australia (MDFA) for 15 years," Ms Buttrose said. "Each May, during MDFA's Macula Month, I advocate for Australians over the age of 50 to see an optometrist for an eye examination, including a check of the macula.

"In a COVID-19 environment, our call to action is even more vital if we are to avoid thousands of people going unnecessarily blind on the other side of this pandemic," Ms Buttrose warned.

"If you require injections for wet (neovascular) AMD or diabetic macular edema, or other macular conditions, it is *essential* that you attend your specialist appointment or discuss your treatment options with your ophthalmologist.

"Similarly, if you notice *any* sudden changes in your vision, or experience eye pain – even if you don't have a diagnosed eye condition – it could be an eye emergency. It is vitally important that you contact your optometrist or ophthalmologist as soon as possible.

"Let's make sure we all see each other on the other side of COVID-19," Ms Buttrose said.

Ms Buttrose's plea follows reports from ophthalmologists around Australia of a dramatic increase in the number of patients cancelling essential eye appointments. This is despite reassurances from the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists (RANZCO) that eye injections are an essential treatment and therefore exempt from Australian Government 'stay at home' regulations.

"I understand that some people might be concerned about leaving their homes to get treatments," Ms Buttrose said, "but I can assure everyone that clinics are sterile environments and stringent clinical guidelines have been put in place to ensure people's safety.

"Whether you're at home or living in aged care, these eye injections are vitally important to preserving sight.

“Many of you have lived through times of hardship, through wars, depressions, and times of national insecurity and anxiety. Once again, with the COVID-19 pandemic, we find ourselves in an unexpected time of uncertainty, where clarity of communication and correct information is paramount.

“I want to stress if you have a scheduled eye injection, if you are a family carer or someone who needs to take a person to a scheduled eye injection, and you have not been in contact with COVID-19, you are **not** breaching public health measures to attend that appointment. Obviously, if you are unwell, please phone first for advice.

“I understand people are apprehensive but keeping your sight must be your priority. Ring and speak with your ophthalmologist or the receptionist. You can also call MDFA’s National Helpline, **1800 111 709** for free telephone advice and a free Amsler grid, a useful tool for monitoring vision changes at home,” Ms Buttrose said.

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ABOUT MACULAR DISEASE FOUNDATION AUSTRALIA (MDFA)

MDFA is the peak national body representing the voice of the macular disease community. It is committed to reducing the incidence and impact of macular disease, the leading cause of blindness and severe vision loss in Australia. It provides a range of information and support services via its **National Helpline 1800 111 709**. The National Helpline remains open and is staffed remotely.

ABOUT MACULAR DISEASE

Macular disease covers a range of painless conditions that affect the central retina (the macula) at the back of the eye. The most common are age-related macular degeneration (AMD), and diabetic retinopathy (DR), including diabetic macular edema (DME). AMD accounts for 50% of blindness in Australia. One in seven (approximately 1.29 million) Australians over the age of 50 have some evidence of AMD.

ABOUT WET (NEOVASCULAR) AMD

Wet (neovascular) AMD is the most aggressive form of AMD and central vision changes are often sudden and severe. Wet AMD often leads to a rapid loss of central vision. While there is no cure for AMD, there is highly effective medical treatment available for wet AMD. Standard treatment involves an injection of anti-VEGF medication into the eye (intravitreal injection). For most people, treatment usually begins with injections at monthly intervals. Depending on the response, the interval between injections may be extended. For most patients, ongoing or indefinite treatment is required.

ITA BUTTROSE AC OBE

Ita Buttrose AC OBE was Patron of Macular Disease Foundation Australia from 2005 until early this year. She recently retired from the role, due to her commitments as Chair of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. However, such is her concern about the number of elderly Australians missing crucial eye injections, she wanted to speak to the macular disease community, to address this issue.

Ms Buttrose has a family history of AMD. Her father Charles and two of his siblings lost their sight to AMD. His youngest brother, Ita’s uncle Gerald Buttrose, has retained his sight thanks to regular eye injections for his wet AMD. He is now 96.

MEDIA CONTACTS:

Steven McArthur | Buzz Group | Director
E: steven@buzzgroup.com.au | M: +61 412 457 471

Natasha Rontziokos | Buzz Group | Communications Lead
E: natasha@buzzgroup.com.au | M: +61 421 272 390

National Helpline: 1800 111 709 www.mdfoundation.com.au