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National Strategic Action Plan puts macular disease on the health agenda

A federal Government commitment to the National Strategic Action Plan developed by Macular Disease Foundation Australia to save the sight of Australians – backed by a firm commitment of funding – is recognition of the enormous impact macular disease has in our society.

Health Minister Greg Hunt MP has made a pre-budget federal Government commitment of \$3million over the next four years.

Macular Disease Foundation Australia (MDFA) CEO Dee Hopkins welcomed Minister Hunt's endorsement of the Action Plan, which outlines a national, coordinated response and informs how limited health care resources can be better coordinated and targeted across all levels of government.

"Macular disease covers a range of conditions that affect the central retina – the macula – at the back of the eye, robbing people of detailed central vision. It is the leading cause of blindness and severe vision loss in Australia.

"There are approximately 8.5 million Australians over the age of 50 at risk of macular disease. Over 1.7 million Australians are estimated to have some evidence of macular disease already.

Age-related macular degeneration (AMD) accounts for 50% of blindness in Australia and primarily affects people over 50 years of age. Diabetic Eye Disease (DED) is the leading cause of preventable blindness in working-age Australians – everyone with diabetes is at risk.

"Australia is a world leader in fighting macular disease. Over the past decade, we've seen key stakeholders from across the health sector and industry unite to prevent, detect and manage macular disease.

"The 'roadmap' outlined in this 44-point action plan will allow this partnership to continue in a coordinated, strategic way. It is built on four 'pillars' of action – prevention and early detection; treatment; support for people with macular disease; and data and research," she said.

"These action points will help reduce – and ideally prevent – the economic, social and emotional costs of vision loss and blindness as a result of macular disease, greatly assisting the members of our community living with macular disease, their families and carers," Ms Hopkins said.

MDFA's National Research Advisor and world-leading Ophthalmologist, Professor Paul Mitchell, AO said the Action Plan addresses issues relating to treatment, research and better access and use of available aggregate data.

"Australia is recognised as a world leader in macular disease research and the Action Plan articulates a framework and agenda to enable that sight-saving work to continue in a coordinated way.

"As our population ages and becomes more at risk of age-related macular degeneration, and with a rising prevalence of diabetic eye disease in working aged Australians, the incidence and impact of macular disease will only increase and put additional strain on our healthcare system, which is why this Action Plan is so important," Professor Mitchell said.

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

ABOUT MACULAR DISEASE FOUNDATION AUSTRALIA (MDFA)

MDFA is the peak national body representing the voice of the macular disease community. It is a charity 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.

ABOUT MACULAR DISEASE

Macular disease covers a range of painless conditions that affect the central retina (the macula) at the back of the eye. These include age-related macular degeneration (AMD), diabetic retinopathy (DR), including diabetic macular edema (DME), retinal vein occlusion, myopic macular degeneration, macular telangiectasia, inherited forms of macular disease and conditions affecting the structure of the macula.

The macula is responsible for detailed central vision and you use it for activities such as reading, driving and recognising faces. Macular diseases do not lead to total (“black”) blindness.

Early detection and prompt intervention are crucial to saving sight. People can have early signs of macular disease without knowing it, but when symptoms do appear, these can include:

- Difficulty in reading or any other activity which requires detailed central vision (despite wearing appropriate glasses)
- Distortion, where straight lines may appear wavy or bent
- Problems distinguishing faces
- Dark patches in your central vision

ABOUT AGE-RELATED MACULAR DEGENERATION (AMD)

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. AMD is a chronic disease with a prevalence 50 times that of multiple sclerosis and four times that of dementia.

Early and intermediate stages of AMD are characterised by a progressive build-up of waste material (drusen) under the retina. The late, vision-threatening stages are divided into atrophic (dry) AMD, caused by the gradual loss (atrophy) of retinal cells, and neovascular (wet) AMD, caused by the formation of fragile blood vessels which leak fluid and blood within and under the retina.

There is no cure. Diet and lifestyle can play a role in preventing and slowing down the progression of AMD. Highly effective treatment is available for the neovascular (wet) form of AMD. All Australians over the age of 50 years should have an eye examination and make sure their macula is checked regularly.

ABOUT DIABETIC EYE DISEASE (DED)

Approximately 1.2 million Australians have been diagnosed with diabetes. Everyone with diabetes is at risk of developing DED, and the most common form is diabetic retinopathy (DR). Almost everyone with type 1 diabetes and over 60% of people with type 2 diabetes will develop DED within 20 years of diagnosis. Periods of poorly controlled glucose levels increase the risk of developing diabetic eye disease earlier and of having more severe disease.

Diabetic Macular Edema (DME) is a complication in some people with DED. High blood glucose levels can lead to damage of the small blood vessels in the retina at the back of the eye. If these leaking vessels result in swelling of the central macula area it is called DME. If this swelling (edema) involves the centre of the macula it can cause loss of vision.

Everyone with diabetes should have an eye examination and make sure their macula is checked regularly.

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