

# Curable eye disease still rife among Indigenous Australians

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(from left) Fourth-year Master of Optometry students Antara Saha and Kate Weller with Professor Hugh Taylor.

Australia remains the only developed country in the world not to have eliminated trachoma, the leading cause of infectious blindness, despite recent progress in tackling the disease.

While it disappeared from mainstream Australian society 100 years ago,

[trachoma](#) continues to be a significant problem among remote [Indigenous communities](#).

Professor Hugh Taylor, Harold Mitchell Chair of Indigenous Eye Health at the University of Melbourne, told *Flinders Indaily* that while trachoma rates in some areas of central Australia had plunged in the four years since the Rudd Government's commitment to eliminating the disease, much more work needed to be done.

"We're halfway through the work but, at the moment, the money runs out at the end of June and we need the commitment for ongoing funding," Professor Taylor said.

"As of today there's a lot of uncertainty: will this highly successful, highly important, highly visible program actually continue to be funded?"

Professor Taylor, who was visiting Flinders University's Department of [Optometry](#) and [Vision Science](#) to talk to students about Indigenous [eye health](#) and discuss research with department head Professor Konrad Pesudovs, said trachoma had "come on and gone off the agenda".

"Fred Hollows raised the issue in the '70s but then it got swamped by other things and the attention has been on other things such as diabetes or alcoholism or [kidney failure](#)," he said.

"We've actually developed a whole lot of much more effective ways of eliminating trachoma. The [World Health Organization](#) has developed a strategy that combines medical, surgical, health education and environmental components that actually works."

Simple measures such as promoting clean faces and [personal hygiene](#) can go a long way to eradicating trachoma. But improving the health of

Indigenous Australians, Professor Taylor said, also had a social dimension.

The passage of an Act of Recognition in the Federal Parliament, on the day of this interview, was cause for optimism.

"I don't know it will affect the non-Indigenous community's perceptions and attitudes greatly but I think it has a very important role to play for the Indigenous people of Australia, their sense of identity and place in the community," he said.

"I've been extraordinarily impressed by the positive impact that the Rudd Apology has had on so many Indigenous people. I've also been very impressed by the negative impact the Northern Territory Intervention had on the feelings and self-worth of very many people in the NT...The unilaterality and lack of consultation was just devastating to people. It was really hurtful."

The "profound depression" produced by the rejection of land rights claims and which lasts for years was another case in point.

"These things, while one sees them as symbolic or important here or there, actually have a huge impact on the whole way people see themselves and their community within the greater Australian society," Professor Taylor said.

Provided by Flinders University

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