



Impact report

Delivering high quality eye care services for asylum seekers and refugees

The impact of the partnership between the Australian College of Optometry and the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre



28 March 2023



Contents

VISION FOR HIGH QUALITY EYE CARE SERVICES	4
PARTNERING TO DELIVER EYE CARE SERVICES	5
Eye clinic at ASRC Health Centre	5
About the partners	6
About this report	8
THE IMPACT OF EYE CARE SERVICES	10
How impact is created	10
The impact for patients	12

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Vision for high quality eye care services

The Australian College of Optometry (ACO) is proud to partner with the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC).

The establishment of an optometry clinic on site at the ASRC in 2022 is a great step forward to the provision of culturally safe eye care for asylum seekers and refugees. The ACO is driven by the belief that healthcare should be equitable and free from barriers. We strive to embed respect and cultural responsiveness with every person we provide care for. Our public health eye clinics and outreach programs play an essential role in removing these barriers and delivering care which encourages independence, empowerment, and dignity within our communities.



Sophie Koh
ACO President

The partnership that ASRC has built with ACO is a great partnership that has made eye care more accessible for people seeking asylum.

Providing free glasses and tailored care in a trusted setting has not only removed barriers for our clients, it has enhanced people's overall experience of health care. ASRC works hard to find the kind of collaborations that ease the barriers and increase equity of access to services for people seeking asylum and refugees, and the work with ACO providing optometry services is a living example of a truly productive partnership.



Kon Karapanagiotidis OAM
CEO Asylum Seeker Resource Centre

Partnering to deliver eye care services

Eye clinic at ASRC Health Centre

The Australian College of Optometry (ACO) and the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) have partnered to establish an eye care clinic at ASRC's Health Centre in Footscray, Melbourne. Supported by funding provided by the Lionel & Yvonne Spencer Trust, managed by Perpetual, the clinic has provided eye care services to 36 asylum seekers or refugees since it commenced in March 2022.

The clinic operates on the first Thursday of every month, with the number of available appointments increasing from four per day in March 2022 to seven per day from October 2022 as awareness of the clinic and demand for appointments increased. Commencing February 2023, the optometry service will be made available on a fortnightly basis at the ASRC.

Navigating a new culture, language, and community can be challenging for newly arrived asylum seekers and refugees. Asylum seeker and refugee communities face additional barriers to accessing health services, including cost; low health literacy; understanding local health services and how to navigate the Australian health system; distance to the service; lack of transport options and inability to use public transport; and difficulty making appointments and completing forms.¹ Some asylum seekers and refugees also face restricted access to health care due to their ineligibility for Medicare and having no working rights or income support. Without the ASRC Health Centre and other services committed to upholding health as a human right, these individuals would not have access to essential health services that many Australians are able to take for granted.

'Patients have no income, no work rights which impacts their ability to earn income. ASRC supports however we can' - nurse at ASRC Health Centre

In recognition of these barriers, the ACO and ASRC co-designed a satellite clinic providing a high-quality optometry service in ASRC's centrally located and culturally responsive environment. The optometry service is co-located alongside existing resources offered by the ASRC. At the same time as attending their eye appointment, patients can access groceries at the Foodbank, top up their Myki card, access employment services, access other health services such as physiotherapy and GP services, or simply have a free meal and a chat with other members, volunteers or staff.

'I have been using services for a long time, since 2014. The centre has helped a lot, they have sent me to hospital, otherwise I might not be here anymore. I appreciate their hard work' - eye clinic patient

At the clinic, the visiting ACO optometrist plays an important role in:

- eye health assessment and screening for refractive errors, the most common type of eye problem that makes it hard to see clearly, and chronic eye diseases
- provision of glasses
- referral of more complex cases to the ACO clinic in Carlton or public hospitals for ophthalmological interventions
- eye health promotion to support patients to recognise the need for eye health maintenance for themselves and their family.

¹ Tyrrell L, Duell-Piening P, Morris M et al. *Talking about health and experiences of using health services with people from refugee backgrounds*, Final Report. Melbourne, Australia: Victorian Refugee Health Network; 2016 Sept.

'Very nice, very professional. She's the best. Very good doctor. I paid her nothing, but she did the best for me' – eye clinic patient

Interpreter services are available for those patients who require it.

Optometry consultations are provided at no cost to the patient and glasses, if needed, are provided at no cost.

About the partners

The ACO and ASRC have partnered for a number of years to ensure asylum seekers and refugees have access to high quality eye care services. Before the satellite clinic was established in Footscray, ASRC clients were referred to ACO's Carlton clinic, or its network of metropolitan and outreach clinics. The establishment of the culturally appropriate outreach service recognises the practical and psychological barriers faced by asylum seekers and refugees accessing mainstream services.

Australian College of Optometry (ACO)

The ACO's core mission is to improve the eye health and wellbeing of Australians through quality, affordable eye care, world class research and education. Through a network of established clinics and outreach locations it provides quality affordable eye care for disadvantaged Victorians, including people on the pension and who hold a health care card, people at risk of experiencing homelessness, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, refugee and asylum seekers, people with disability, and culturally and linguistically diverse people.

'I really enjoy being there. The staff and clients are really nice and kind. It is a special part of my career. It is interesting to meet people from different walks of life' – ACO optometrist

Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC)

Founded in 2001, the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) is Australia's largest human rights organisation providing support to people seeking asylum.

The ASRC Health Centre has been offering health services to people seeking asylum in Victoria since 2002 and is the largest facility of its kind in Australia. It provides a range of health services for people seeking asylum living in the community and prioritises people seeking asylum without access to Medicare.

The ASRC Health Centre acts as a vital link between individual community members, their families and the ACO clinic and its services. ASRC facilitates eye screening uptake through health promotion during the health assessments provided at the clinic. In order to support the eye clinic, they also facilitate important coordination activities including:

- maintenance of patient records and referral lists for ACO
- scheduling of visits and correspondence with patients
- coordination of follow up visits as required.

'The ASRC is a really special place to be. The staff there work really hard with the client and support the client. Cutting out the referral process can result in clients accessing the care sooner and remove some barriers to access' – ACO optometrist



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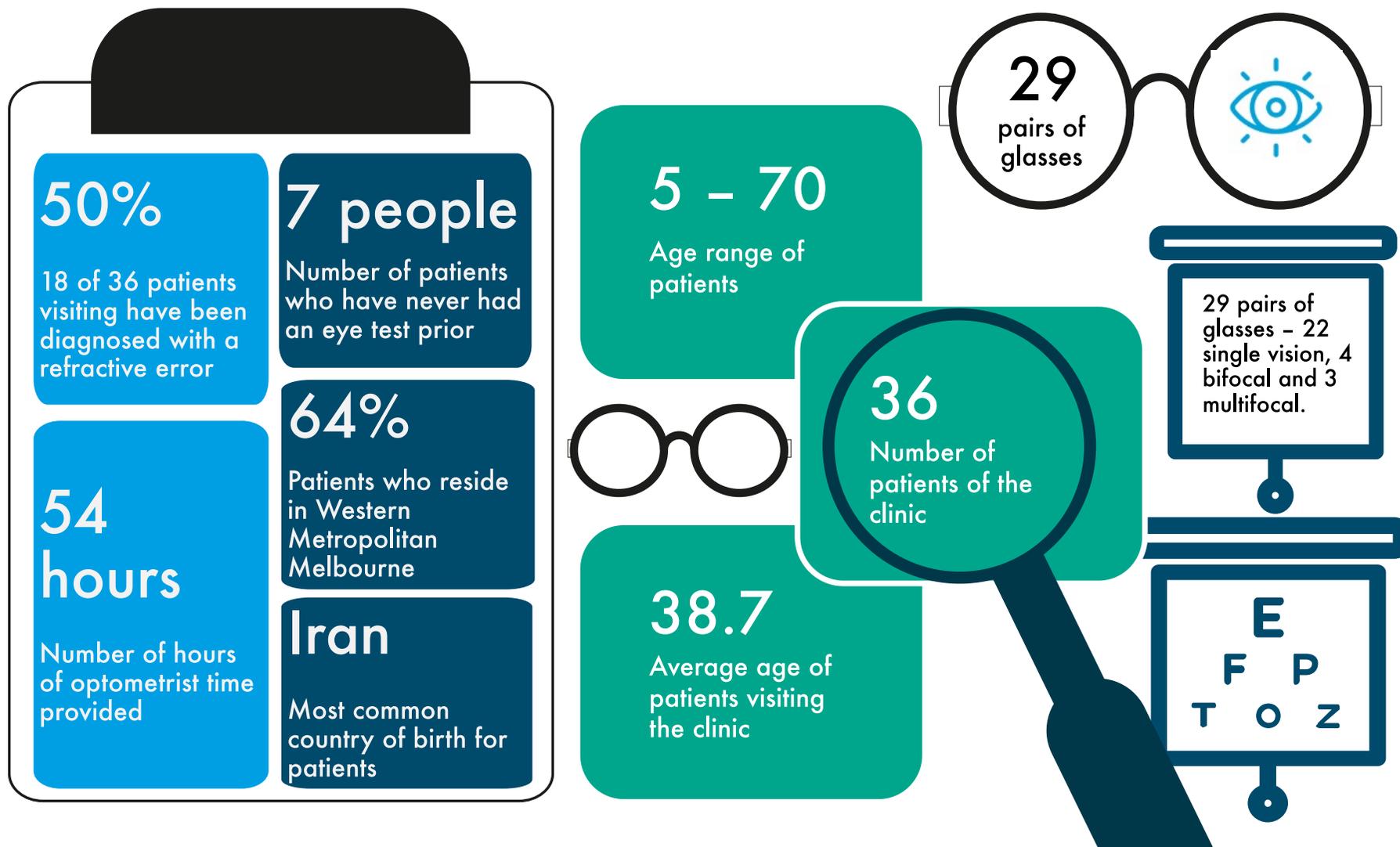
About this report

This report was commissioned by ACO and prepared by Think Impact to review the social impact of the ACO eye clinic at ASRC's Health Centre in Footscray, Melbourne. The research that informed this report included interviews with:

- An ACO optometrist delivering services at the eye care clinic
- Two nurses from the ASRC Health Centre
- ACO's Clinical Services team
- Six patients of the eye care clinic. This included past and current patients and adults and children. Patients provided consent to participate in an interview and were given a voucher to remunerate them for their time. Three of the six interviews were conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.

This report published in March 2023 is based on research undertaken in October to December 2022.

2022 highlights from the ACO eye clinic at the ASRC Health Centre



The impact of eye care services

'You should see their faces when they put their glasses on for the first time' – nurse at ASRC Health Centre

How impact is created

The partnership between ACO, ASRC and the Lionel & Yvonne Spencer Trust draws together resources, expertise and relationships that are key to creating the impact for eye care patients.

Funding provided by the Lionel & Yvonne Spencer Trust was used to purchase the infrastructure to establish the outreach clinic and to cover the cost of care for patients without Medicare.

Embedding services at the ASRC where patients are already engaged within the community enables greater reach than clinical services at fixed sites. Vulnerable asylum seekers and refugee communities are more likely to access services that are provided in a familiar environment and in partnership with a trusted organisation. The ACO's culturally safe model of care has been tailored to asylum seeker and refugee communities.

'There was far more engagement for ACO when working at ASRC and VACCHO (Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation). ASRC has provided a blueprint for going where people feel comfortable' – ACO Clinical Services team member

ACO have always supported asylum seekers and refugees, but now they have come here. Members come here for everything – food, Myki, lunch services. It is easy because they are coming here anyway. While they're waiting for the physio, they are seeing the banner for the eye test. Coming somewhere familiar that is easy to come to is important' – nurse at ASRC Health Centre

The value creation model for the eye clinic is depicted in Figure 1. The outcomes for patients are discussed further in the following section.

Partnering to create impact at the ACO eye clinic at the ASRC Health Centre

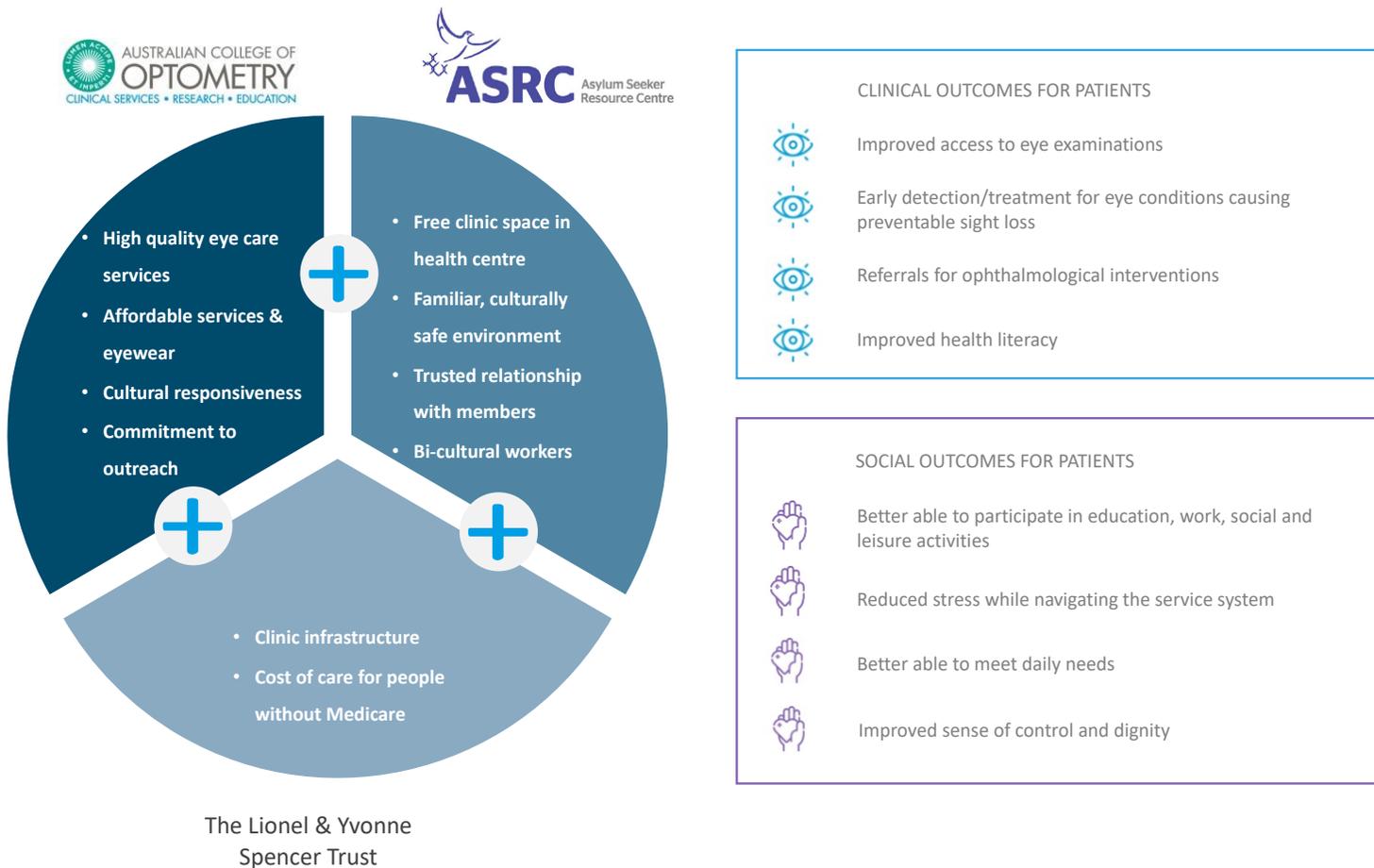


Figure 1 How impact is created

The impact for patients

The eye clinic creates a range of clinical and social outcomes for patients.

The eye clinic is **improving access to eye examinations** for asylum seekers and refugees by providing services that are affordable for people on no/low income and available to anyone including those who are ineligible for Medicare due to their visa status. However, providing the service is necessary but not sufficient to ensure uptake – the convenient and familiar location and the culturally responsive environment of the ASRC means that people who frequently experience disadvantage and discrimination feel willing and able to access the service.

Without the clinic, members would have to go to a different place, join a waitlist. They may not be able to get to their appointment, they may be nervous about transportation with city appointments and whether there will be interpreters, loads wouldn't go. With the clinic being at ASRC, there is an element of cultural safety with bi-cultural workers and this offers a safer experience, and members know that' – nurse at ASRC Health Centre

Patients who access the service benefit from **early detection, diagnosis and intervention for common and treatable eye conditions**. For many patients, this means receiving prescription glasses to improve vision or correct eye conditions. Early detection and management of common problems such as refractive errors that make it hard to see clearly can provide better learning opportunities for children and employment and life outcomes for adults. For some patients with complex or chronic health conditions, timely eye testing and intervention may prevent or treat conditions with the potential to cause sight loss. **Referrals for ophthalmological interventions** are provided where needed. The diagnoses of the patients are presented in Table 1. The data indicates that many patients are diagnosed with multiple conditions.

Table 1 Conditions diagnosed in eye care patients at the ASRC

Condition	Patients presenting	
	Number	%
Anterior eye conditions	10	21%
Age-related macular degeneration	1	2%
Cataract	4	8%
Retinal conditions	3	6%
Anterior ischemic optic neuropathy	1	2%
Refractive error	18	38%
Binocular vision issues (Amblyopia, Strabismus, Accommodative/Convergence Dysfunction)	8	16%
Diabetes	1	2%

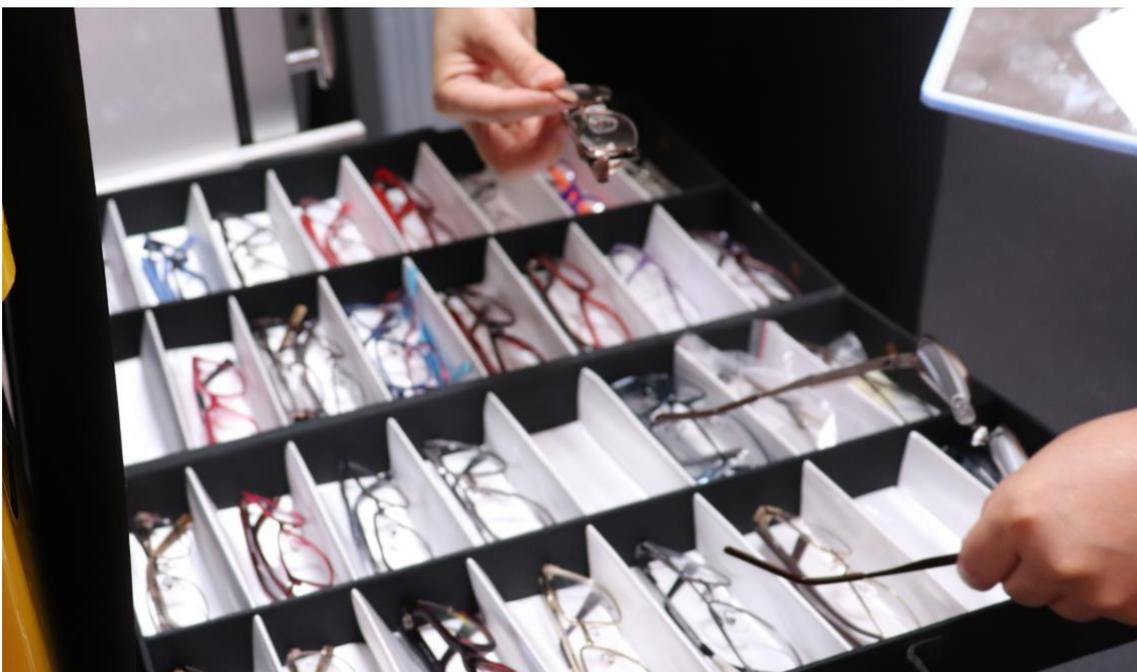
Even for those patients who may not require treatment, their **health literacy is improved** by the information provided by the optometrist about the importance of regular eye tests and building their understanding of how to navigate health services in Australia.

'Patients are in an environment that they are familiar with, it builds lots of trust and takes away fear and anxiety and helps them feel confident. In terms of the impact, there is no charge for the glasses due to the funding, which hopefully goes a long way in supporting the client. Compared to a local optometrist shop, this clinic has an interpreter booked in which helps in accessibility. We can do a full eye test, and for children we can check eye muscles, and clients can access a good eye test and if we need to refer them, we can refer them to the public hospital. A lot of patients will not have a concession card, and we don't charge for a consultation. Financially that eases the impact for them as well' – ACO optometrist

Good vision and eye health are essential for any person to **participate in education, work, social and leisure activities**. Patients reported being able to drive, participate more fully at school, independently read correspondence and be more self-reliant at home and work. Asylum seekers and refugees may face many barriers to participation in all aspects of their lives. Being able to access a service that has been intentionally designed to be accessible **reduces stress** for patients. Unlike many other aspects of their lives, asylum seekers and refugees do not face a battle to access eye care services, along with all services provided by the ASRC. By accessing eye care services and improving their vision, patients are **better able to meet their daily needs** and feel a **greater sense of control** over their circumstances. For people who are deprived of choice and control in many aspects of their lives, accessing a service, being treated with care and even being able to choose your own glasses frames provides a **sense of dignity** in an otherwise disempowered existence. Good vision enables people to participate in hobbies such as reading, sewing and watching television that can provide much needed **enjoyment and relaxation** for people who may be dealing with the impacts of trauma and displacement and navigating complex legal processes to fight for their protection and safety.

'They gave me glasses. I wear them every day - watch TV, working in my home, can't do without glasses' – eye clinic patient

'Fear for members when it comes to eye test of it costing a lot, and the free test provides monetary relief. It is [empowering] to be able to care for your eyesight. Eyesight affects the job you get, your ability to drive, lots of members at ASRC do casual work such as Uber and factories that require good eyesight. Many patients feel helpless in their situation and disheartened' – nurse at ASRC Health Centre



Case study – eyewear options for a young mother

'This is a place that helps a lot of people like me'

Diwa² is an asylum seeker who is not eligible for Medicare. She has previously used other optometrist services for eye tests and to purchase glasses, however the cost is a barrier for this mother of two children who is currently not working and living in a single income household.

Diwa saw the ACO sign outside the Health Centre during one of her frequent visits to the ASRC to access the Foodbank or top up her Myki. The ASRC staff were able to book her appointment, which made it easy for her to access the eye care she needed.

Diwa is grateful that the ACO has free eye care services and appreciates that the clinic is located in Footscray, as it is easily accessible for her with her children and via public transport. For someone with no access to income support or Medicare, being able to access a free service allows her to gain back a little bit of independence and control around her health and meeting her everyday needs.

'The eye clinic is really good and helpful'



² Name changed to protect patient identity

Case study – seeing his way to better grades

Eight year old Mohammed³, was having difficulty seeing the whiteboard at school and following along with his classes. He had lost a pair of glasses that were funded by his school and there were no additional funds for a replacement. His teachers stressed the importance of glasses to Mohammed's parents, but they were unable to afford a replacement pair.

'I needed glasses but my family couldn't afford them. My teacher let me sit closer to the front of the class, but my grades still suffered because I had a hard time reading and writing'

Mohammed's mother reached out for help to the ASRC who were able to book in Mohammed for a free eye test and a new pair of glasses. With these glasses, his grades have improved and he is able to engage more fully in his education.

'Now that I have my new glasses, everything is different. I can see the whiteboard clearly, and I'm not stressed out about my vision anymore. I'm enjoying everything in life, and school is going fine. I have a lot of friends now, and my teacher says I'm doing a lot better with my glasses. I'm trying my best at school. Now I feel like I can do well'

The provision of glasses has had a significant impact on Mohammed's daily life, beyond just the medical benefits of improved vision. It has also improved his connection to his learning and teachers, as well as his overall sense of engagement in the community.

'I was so happy to get the glasses, because we wouldn't have been able to afford them. Having the glasses paid for took a lot of stress out of the situation'



³ Name changed to protect patient identity



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