



Breaking down barriers to accessing dementia-friendly eyecare



What is the focus of the research?

Developing resources that remove the unique barriers people living with dementia experience when accessing routine eyecare.



Why is it important?

Being diagnosed with dementia can be scary and the logistics of everyday life become difficult to navigate as cognition declines. Having poor eyesight can make living with dementia even harder. People have a greater risk of falls, hospitalisation and the loss of independence.

Seeing well matters to people living with dementia. Reduced vision can negatively impact social interactions and facial recognition, causing feelings of isolation and anxiety. It impairs a person's ability to perform activities of daily living, such as preparing meals, grocery shopping and doing housework. When independence and self-efficacy decline, so too does cognition.

Vision loss is common in people with dementia, but two-thirds of its causes are treatable. Many

of these causes can be detected during a routine eye test. While Medicare funds optometrist-performed eye tests for all Australians, research shows that people with dementia experience multiple barriers to accessing this routine care.

In Australia, there are no clinical guidelines to support optometrists working with people who have dementia. There is no formal training to help build their understanding of dementia and the clinical confidence to adapt standard testing to accommodate different levels of dementia. A negative experience where dementia was not accommodated, or concerns about the ability to take part in eye tests as dementia progresses, may make people less likely to attend future appointments. This means eye problems, which increase with age, can silently develop and progress undetected.

Dr Coleman hopes to eliminate these barriers by identifying ways to improve the experience of having these tests performed. By providing eyecare tailored to the specific needs of people with dementia, early detection and treatment of sight problems can improve quality of life and allow people to live independently for longer.



How will this happen?

Stage 1: involve Dementia Australia advocates in the preparation of the project for human research ethics review, to ensure the process is shaped and guided by the needs of people with dementia.

Stage 2: interview optometrists, carers and people living with dementia, to explore their views and experiences of eye tests and routine eye care from different perspectives.

Stage 3: code and analyse interviews to identify key themes, and present these to Dementia Advocates to determine key messages from the research.

Stage 4: use these key messages and existing literature to develop an online training course for optometrists, focused on delivering dementia-friendly eye tests and tailored eyecare advice.

Stage 5: develop an information card for people with dementia and their caregivers about dementia-friendly eye tests and looking after their eyes at home. Dementia Advocates will support the design and review of these cards.

- Being able to see an optometrist who knows about dementia.
- Knowledge about what to expect from a dementia-friendly eye test.
- Tailored advice about looking after their eyes at home.



How will people with all levels of dementia have their voices heard?

Diminished capacity is a major concern for people with dementia. Unfortunately, those without the capacity to give informed consent are often excluded from dementia research. Because diminished capacity significantly affects the way people with dementia participate in an eye test and if/how they communicate with the optometrist, it is important that people with dementia of all capacities can contribute to this study.

Therefore, people living with dementia who do not pass a standardised capacity assessment will be supported to share their experiences in a meaningful way with an experienced researcher who is skilled in interviewing people with cognitive impairment.



What will this mean for people with dementia?

- A more positive experience when attending an eye test with or without a caregiver.



Who's undertaking the research?

Dr Marianne Coleman, The University of Melbourne

Dr Coleman is a clinical vision research fellow at the Department of Optometry and Vision Sciences, and the Australian College of Optometry's National Vision Research Institute. She qualified as an orthoptist at the University of Liverpool, then after some time in clinical practice, moved to Glasgow Caledonian University to study visual perception for her PhD.

Since then, Dr Coleman has been involved in a variety of health services research for older adults living with long-term conditions. Her previous research about the ability of people living with dementia to judge distances received an award from the UK Royal Society of Medicine. Dr Coleman is an early career researcher and has contributed to podcasts about dementia research in the UK.

The title of her project is *Breaking down barriers to accessing dementia-friendly eyecare*.

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