

## 2.1 Visual impairment and blindness in Australia

The most prevalent causes of vision loss and blindness in Australia, as in other developed countries, are the age-related degenerative eye diseases such as macular degeneration, glaucoma and cataract. In 2004, 9.4% of the 4.7 million Australians aged 55 or more were visually impaired. Cataract was the most prevalent eye disease (31%), followed by age-related macular degeneration (AMD) (3.1%), diabetic retinopathy (2.8%) and glaucoma (2.3%) (AIHW 2005). Together with uncorrected refractive error, these diseases contribute to more than 90% of visual impairment in this age group. If refractive error (which can be corrected by eyewear) is excluded, cataract is the primary cause of 40% of cases of vision loss in older Australians and AMD the primary cause of 28%.

The leading causes of blindness among Australians aged 55 or more are AMD (50%), glaucoma (16%) and cataract (12%).

Some vision problems among older Australians are acquired early in life (eg retinitis pigmentosa and eye trauma), but at a population level their prevalence is small compared with vision problems associated with ageing.

Since prevalence rates of eye disease are strongly age-related and Australia has an ageing population, the number of people with visual impairment may well increase nationally. This will have significant economic implications and affect the provision of health and welfare services.