

## Global Eye Health and Vision Care

Every five seconds a person in the world goes blind, and a child goes blind every minute. Around the world, 161 million people are blind or vision impaired due to eye diseases such as cataract, diabetic retinopathy, glaucoma, trachoma and macular degeneration. An extra 153 million people are vision impaired from uncorrected refractive error.

The good news is as much as 75 percent of blindness can be prevented or treated. Vision 2020 Australia member organisations working overseas have the knowledge and expertise to eliminate avoidable blindness and improve vision care.

### Blindness exacerbates poverty

Around 90 percent of the world's blind people live in developing countries, and there are strong links between vision loss and poverty. In many developing countries, poverty contributes to blindness.

Improving eye health and vision care is closely linked to poverty reduction, and seven of the eight United Nations Millennium Development Goals depend on tackling blindness and vision impairment. The most effective way to reduce vision loss is to strengthen national health systems to deliver high-quality services that meet the needs of the poor.

### Preventing vision loss makes economic sense

Investments in preventing avoidable blindness and vision impairment yield high economic and social returns. The World Bank found procedures available for the prevention and treatment of blindness are among the most successful and cost-effective of all health interventions.

In 2000, the global cost of blindness and low vision was estimated at US\$ 42 billion. The number of people with severe vision disability will increase above 75 million by the year 2020, with costs from lost earnings and increased health expenditure likely to skyrocket.

With successful implementation of national VISION 2020 plans in countries around the world, the annual loss of productivity of individuals with a vision impairment is projected to rise to only US\$ 58 billion in 2020, equivalent to an overall global saving over 20 years of US\$ 223 billion.

### Big problems, simple solutions

Cataract accounts for almost half of blindness in the world. For most people, cataract is a natural result of ageing. Treating cataract and restoring sight is simple; in some developing countries, cataract surgery can take as little as 20 minutes and cost only \$25. Throughout Asia and the Pacific, communities need more eye surgeons, better public hospitals and more supportive health systems to step-up this sight-saving work.

Refractive error is a term for common eye conditions such as myopia (nearsightedness), hyperopia (farsightedness), astigmatism and presbyopia. Uncorrected refractive error hampers performance at school and reduces employment opportunities and productivity. While refractive error is uncorrected in more than 153 million people around the world, it's a problem with a very simple solution. By training more optometrists and eye specialists to conduct eye examinations and provide low-cost spectacles, we can increase opportunities for people and dramatically improve quality of life.

## Childhood blindness

With discrimination, exclusion and a shortage of disability support programs, up to 60 percent of children in low income countries are likely to die within one year of becoming blind. Around 1.4 million children are blind with the vast majority in Asia. Blindness and vision impairment limits the education and life choices of otherwise healthy people living in areas gripped by poverty. Blindness and vision impairment places an added burden on families, communities and on health and social services.

About 40 percent of the causes of childhood blindness can be prevented or treated. Early eye examinations and programs to improve nutrition and address Vitamin A-deficiency are key to improving children's eye health in the developing world.

## Eliminating trachoma

Trachoma is a disease of poverty and is the leading cause of infectious blindness worldwide. 84 million people live with active trachoma and nearly 1.3 million people have lost all functional vision from the disease. Globally more than 10 million people have in-turned eyelashes and require surgery to prevent blindness. The majority of these people are women. Trachoma remains a problem in islands of the Pacific, with high infection rates among children. The World Health Organisation recommends a strategy combining a mix of surgery, antibiotics, facial cleanliness and environmental improvement to combat trachoma.

## About Vision 2020 Australia

VISION 2020: *The Right to Sight* is a joint initiative of the World Health Organisation and the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness. Vision 2020 Australia is the national non-government peak body working in partnership to prevent avoidable blindness and improve vision care. Through its Global Committee, Vision 2020 Australia brings together Australian member organisations working internationally.

Organisations that contribute to global work include the ASPECT Foundation, Centre for Eye Research Australia, Christian Blind Mission, Community I-Care, The Eye Foundation, Foresight Australia, The Fred Hollows Foundation, International Centre for Eyecare Education, Optometrists Association Australia, Optometry Giving Sight, The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists, Royal Society for Deaf and Blind Children and Vision Australia.

Vision 2020 Australia is a signatory to the Australian Council for International Development's Code of Conduct.

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