Perceptions of blindness

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A study in a mainly rural area of Ethiopia has revealed that sighted, unilaterally blind and totally blind people have many misconceptions about blindness. The work of cure and prevention demands that widespread ignorance about the causes and implications of blindness be overcome.

In Ethiopia the causes of blindness are, in the large majority of cases, preventable or curable. However, if preventive and therapeutic measures are to have the greatest possible effect it is necessary to understand the attitudes of the public towards blindness. A survey has therefore been conducted in the mainly rural subdistrict of Meskan and Mareko, which has a population of 250 000; the participants were 1751 randomly selected heads of household, of whom 1401 were sighted, 246 were unilaterally blind, and 104 were blind in both eyes. After informed consent had been obtained at both the village and household levels, trained lay health workers administered questionnaires translated into Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia, and, where necessary, into local dialects. The community was largely illiterate and had had little or no exposure to modern medicine.

Knowledge and attitudes of the fully sighted

Most of the interviewees in this category were aged 20-60 years. Whereas 83% of fully sighted people were married, this was true of only 41% of totally blind people and 67% of people who were unilaterally blind.

Virtually all the fully sighted people interviewed had heard or read about blindness or had seen a blind person; 73% thought they knew the causes of blindness, 94% said it was not inherited and 98% that the causes were not contagious. It was claimed by 70% that they knew how to prevent blindness, while 82% believed that the condition could not be cured. Blindness was a problem of the elderly according to 85% of the respondents.

Among the same interviewees, 77% said they would object to a member of their family marrying a blind person, while 80% said they themselves would not marry a blind person. It was thought by 85% that blind people could not attend school because of their disability, and 87% were unaware that there were schools and scripts for the blind. When asked what society should do for blind people, 83% suggested giving alms. Only 14% said they would be willing to employ a blind person were they in a position to do so.

Knowledge and attitudes of the totally and unilaterally blind

The highest levels of widowhood and divorce were found among the totally blind, at 47% and 8% respectively. Only 1% of the totally blind could read (in Braille). Of the totally blind people who were married, 71% had married before the onset of blindness; all who were single and 25% of divorcees considered...
that blindness accounted for their marital status. Among the unilaterally blind, however, only 11% of those who were single and none who were divorced considered this to be the case.

Of the totally blind, 86% thought they knew the causes of blindness. The three main groups of causes were said to be febrile illnesses (45%), supernatural factors including punishment by God and curses (33%), and accidents (15%). Hardly anyone believed blindness to be inherited or contagious.

Only 33% of the totally blind and 48% of the unilaterally blind considered blindness to be incurable. With regard to the prevention of blindness, 53% of the totally blind said they knew how to achieve this, and 93% of these people considered that the solution was to obtain immediate treatment when illness occurred; the responses of the unilaterally blind on this matter were similar.

Willingness to work was expressed by 53% of the totally blind, but only 12% were working and the same percentage said they would have employed a blind person had this possibility arisen. In contrast, 95% of the unilaterally blind were willing to work and almost the same percentage were actually working; however, only 19% would have been prepared to employ a blind person. Both groups of respondents said they would allow their own children to play with blind children. Only 5% of the totally blind and 1% of the unilaterally blind wished to mix socially with fully sighted people.

Almost all totally and unilaterally blind people thought blindness prevented education and that educational opportunities should not, therefore, be given to the blind. Large majorities were unaware that there were special schools and scripts for blind people. Virtually all interviewees considered that society should give special care and help to the blind, around three-quarters saying that alms were the best form of assistance. About a fifth said that medication should be provided, while 3% of the totally blind and 6% of the unilaterally blind said the government should provide help.

There was little knowledge in the community about the major causes of blindness, which, contrary to what many interviewees suggested, is by no means a problem limited to the elderly. It is a significant public health problem, having a negative effect on productivity and requiring heavy expenditure on rehabilitation, education and care. Moreover, it has a major adverse impact on rates of morbidity and mortality. Endemic trachoma and associated infections affect a substantial proportion of the people. Other important causes of blindness are cataract, which is remediable, and glaucoma, which is preventable.

A dearth of information appears to have led many in the community to mistaken beliefs and attitudes, resulting in a lack of concern for visually impaired and blind people. In general, negative attitudes prevailed in respect of marriage, other social interactions, job opportunities, rehabilitation and education. Of course, these observations have to be seen in the context of the level of development of the society in question.

Clearly, prevention programmes should be in place. Hygiene is particularly important; in Mexico, for example, it has been shown that the prevalence of trachoma was reduced among children who frequently washed their faces (1).

Heightened awareness and treatment-seeking behaviour are important factors in the fight
against curable blindness. The people in the subdistrict of Meskan and Mareko should be informed of the causes of blindness and of the possibilities of prevention and cure. The nature of cataract, trachoma and other infectious conditions should be explained to them. Blindness caused by glaucoma can only be prevented by raising the community’s awareness of the problem.

The treatment that society has meted out to blind people is reflected in their very negative attitudes towards both the sighted and the blind. The community, the medical profession and the state should jointly endeavour to understand their problems and work towards achieving not only the acceptance of the blind but also their ability to be self-supporting and self-respecting members of society.

By distributing information about blindness to the community and blind people’s families it should be possible to encourage and enable them to participate in prevention activities and rehabilitation. The ability of health care providers to cope with cases of blindness should be enhanced through education.

Much more is needed than the giving of alms. Eliminating blindness requires large measures of understanding and dedicated work. It is necessary to improve socioeconomic conditions and strengthen the health infrastructure. Technical assistance and cooperation from international and nongovernmental organizations would also be of tremendous value.

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Reference


Moderate drinkers need help too

Heavy drinkers are more likely than moderate drinkers to experience severe alcohol-related problems, but those experienced by moderate drinkers are the more numerous, because there are very many more moderate than heavy drinkers. Therefore, to reduce alcohol-related problems, both heavy and moderate drinkers should be targeted. A workplace programme must, therefore, pay attention to the habits of all its employees, and any educational programme must reach all workers.