



WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

FIFTY-SIXTH WORLD HEALTH ASSEMBLY
Provisional agenda item 14.17

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Elimination of avoidable blindness

Report by the Secretariat

1. In pursuance of the resolution on Vision 2020: The Right to Sight – elimination of avoidable blindness, adopted by the Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean,¹ an overview of the global initiative to eliminate avoidable blindness is provided below.
2. Globally, an estimated 45 million people are blind and a further 135 million are visually impaired. However, 80% of that vision loss is preventable or treatable. Projections estimate these numbers to climb to 75 million blind and 200 million visually impaired by the year 2020 unless there is urgent coordinated action.
3. The damage to visual health is concentrated in developing countries, which carry an estimated 90% of those affected by blindness and visual impairment, with profound human and socioeconomic consequences. The impact of lost productivity due to blindness as well as the direct costs of education and rehabilitation has a significant effect on families, communities and nations, particularly those least able to afford such losses. Conversely, the prevention and cure of blindness through equitable access to appropriate care can produce enormous savings for countries and support development in many ways.
4. There are many reasons for the increase in numbers of the blind and visually impaired. Among these are the demographic changes that have swelled the numbers of the elderly in communities, gender inequity, with a disproportionate number of women suffering from avoidable blindness, the relatively low output from existing services (i.e. few people operated and cured), and the inadequacy of resources. For preventive and curative services to be well resourced and to operate efficiently, health authorities must be aware of the magnitude of the problem and commit to cost-effective interventions. A combination of economic recession and new, competing demands for limited health resources have to date actually reduced the funds available for blindness prevention.
5. Although WHO provided support for prevention of blindness almost since its inception, from 1978 on it has formally offered technical support to country activities aimed at the prevention and control of four main causes of blindness and visual impairment. In 1999, the Director-General launched the Global Initiative for the Elimination of Avoidable Blindness, known as “Vision 2020 – the Right to Sight”. The Initiative is a partnership between WHO and the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness and its national and international members. Its goal is the elimination of all preventable and treatable blindness by the year 2020.

¹ Resolution EM/RC49/R.6.

6. The Vision 2020 partnership reflects the long-standing collaborative relationship between WHO and nongovernmental organizations, both in their own right and under the auspices of the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness. The Initiative has three primary components: specific disease control, human resource development, and infrastructure and appropriate technology development. Issues such as awareness-building and advocacy, equity, quality of services and outcome, and resource mobilization are also being addressed.
7. Under the Initiative it is hoped that all countries will develop a national Vision 2020 plan, involving WHO, government, nongovernmental organizations and the private sector. Monitoring and evaluation is an essential part of those plans. Work has already been carried out on standardizing the global indicators to be used. Periodic review of the resulting data will show changes in magnitude of avoidable blindness and the impact of the activities in countries. A midpoint review in 2010 will assess progress.
8. Although over 100 countries have already started national-level Vision 2020 related projects and activities, many countries do not yet have a national plan for blindness prevention in place. Technical support will be a priority for WHO's work in the Initiative. Vision 2020 provides guidance, technical and resource support to countries, working towards the establishment of a sustainable, comprehensive eye-care system within the national health-care systems based on the principles of primary health care.
9. The specific interventions chosen for attention are for the main causes of preventable and/or treatable blindness and visual impairment worldwide for which time-tested, safe, efficacious and cost-effective interventions and technologies are already available. These are: cataract, onchocerciasis, trachoma, avoidable causes of childhood blindness, refractive error, and low vision.
10. Cataract still causes an estimated 50% of all blindness, despite the availability of low-cost surgery that can restore vision. Without equitable access to quality, affordable eye-care, people in many remote parts of the world remain blinded by cataracts. Vision 2020 aims to greatly increase the number of operations for cataracts.
11. There have been global initiatives since 1974 on onchocerciasis control when the Onchocerciasis Control Programme was started, followed by the Onchocerciasis Elimination Programme for the Americas (1992) and the African Programme for Onchocerciasis Control (1995). The remarkable decreases in incidence achieved by the control programmes thus far demonstrate the value of partnership and the economic and social development return on investment in disease control. Vision 2020 will continue those advances.
12. Trachoma remains a scourge in the poorest of the world's poor communities. The WHO Alliance for the Global Elimination of Trachoma was launched in 1997, applying evidence-based strategies through multisectoral, primary health care approaches, and will be supported by the Vision 2020 activities. To date 30 endemic countries have joined the Alliance, as compared to six in 1997.
13. Currently hundreds of thousands of children are suffering from blindness or are at risk of suffering visual loss. Interventions such as vitamin A supplementation, measles immunization, and correction of refractive errors are available to prevent loss of vision and the devastating consequences of childhood blindness. Success in activating these measures would bring immeasurable benefit.

14. Recent studies have confirmed the existence of a large number of cases of uncorrected refractive error. Corrective interventions are cost-effective and positively affect economic development and quality of life. The Initiative will also address low vision care, a grossly neglected field.

15. Only with strong political commitment will the global elimination of avoidable blindness be possible. The governments of Member States, as active partners in Vision 2020, must raise the prevention and control of avoidable blindness higher on their national health agenda.

ACTION BY THE HEALTH ASSEMBLY

16. The Health Assembly is invited to consider the following draft resolution:

The Fifty-sixth World Health Assembly,

Having considered the report on elimination of avoidable blindness;¹

Recalling resolutions WHA22.29, WHA25.55 and WHA28.54 on prevention of blindness, WHA45.10 on disability prevention and rehabilitation, and WHA51.11 on the global elimination of blinding trachoma;

Recognizing that 45 million people in the world today are blind and that a further 135 million people are visually impaired;

Acknowledging that 90% of the world's blind and visually impaired people live in the poorest countries of the world;

Noting the significant economic impact of this situation on both communities and countries;

Aware that most of the causes of blindness are avoidable and that the treatments available are among the most successful and cost-effective of all health interventions;

Recalling that, in order to tackle avoidable blindness and avoid further increase in numbers of blind and visually impaired people, Vision 2020 – the Right to Sight, was launched in 1999 to eliminate avoidable blindness;

Appreciating the efforts made by Member States in recent years to prevent avoidable blindness, but mindful of the need for further action;

1. URGES Member States:

(1) to commit themselves to supporting the Global Initiative for the Elimination of Avoidable Blindness by setting up, not later than 2005, a national Vision 2020 plan, in collaboration with WHO, nongovernmental organizations and the private sector;

¹ Document A56/26.

- (2) to establish a national coordinating committee for Vision 2020, or a national blindness prevention committee to help develop and implement the plan;
- (3) to commence implementation of such plans by 2007 at the latest;
- (4) to include in such plans standardized indicators and periodic monitoring and evaluation, with the aim of showing a reduction in the magnitude of avoidable blindness by 2010;
- (5) to support the mobilization of resources for eliminating avoidable blindness;

2. REQUESTS the Director-General:

- (1) to maintain and strengthen WHO's collaboration with Member States and the partners of the Global Initiative for the Elimination of Avoidable Blindness,
- (2) to provide support for strengthening national capability to assess and to prevent avoidable blindness.

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