



In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Message from
DR HUSSEIN A. GEZAIRY
REGIONAL DIRECTOR
WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION
on the occasion of
WORLD SIGHT DAY
Alexandria, Egypt, 8 October 2009

Your Excellency Governor of Alexandria, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to our annual celebration of World Sight Day, which falls this year on 8 October 2009. World Sight Day is an annual international day of awareness held in support of the global initiative for prevention of blindness “VISION 2020: The Right to Sight”. It is an act of solidarity with the blind and the visually impaired.

The theme of this year’s celebration is “Gender and eye health – equal access to care”. While gender refers to both men and women, evidence has shown that nearly two-thirds of blind people worldwide are women and girls and that is why the theme this year of World Sight Day is gender, with a specific focus on women. Why are there more blind persons among females than males? There are many reasons. To give just two, for example, in many developing countries, women are less likely to receive eye care services than men, and eye health organizations around the world are working to address this gender-based inequity. A meta-analysis of trachoma surveys indicates that women are 1.8 times more likely to have trachoma infection. This may be due in part to their higher contact with children and therefore greater exposure to infection.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is estimated that, at present, around 37 million people in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region are visually impaired, of whom 5.3 million people are blind. In Egypt, around 800 000 people are blind. Vision loss is associated with ageing and there are more older women with vision loss and blindness than men. It must be remembered, however, that

globally up to 80% of blindness is either preventable or treatable with cost-effective interventions. Cataract surgery can be conducted through an outpatient procedure. This simple surgical intervention can lead to considerable improvements in the lives of men, women and their families. However, it has also been shown from population-based surveys that women in low and middle income countries have lower cataract surgical coverage and that if they were to receive cataract surgery at the same rate as men, visual impairment from cataract could be reduced up to 11%.

In order to reduce the burden of blindness and visual impairment, WHO in collaboration with ministries of health and the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB) launched the global initiative of VISION 2020: The Right to Sight, in 1999. Since then, substantial progress has been made in the Region and many organizations are supporting the initiative.

I am pleased to mention that in Alexandria, WHO, in collaboration with the Lions Clubs International Foundation (LCIF), has provided support for the Childhood Blindness Centre in Alexandria Eye Hospital. Moreover, Alexandria Chamber of Commerce has signed a protocol with WHO to support 2000 free cataract surgeries and provide spectacles. Al-Noor Eye Foundation and the Egyptian Association for the Prevention of Blindness are conducting free eye camps in different areas in Egypt, in addition to the support of many other organizations, such as Rotary International Foundation. Despite this support, further efforts are necessary to reduce blindness due to cataract. We need to address the main barriers to the uptake of cataract surgery, especially coverage in rural areas, the quality and cost of surgery, and equitable access to cataract surgery, and indeed all eye care services, for both women and men.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, WHO is working with many partners to address other causes of blindness and visual impairment. This includes blindness due to diabetic retinopathy, which is rapidly increasing due to the high prevalence of diabetes in the Region. We need to take integrated action involving the public and private sectors to address this issue. Uncorrected refractive errors are another cause of blindness and visual impairment and can be easily diagnosed and corrected by a pair of spectacles. However, coverage with refraction services is still low due to the lack of trained human resources in many places. I am

pleased to note that WHO in collaboration with IAPB is working to develop guidelines for eye health, particularly early detection of refractive errors in schoolchildren.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank HRH Prince Abdulaziz Bin Ahmed Al Saud, Chairman, IMPACT–EMR and IAPB, H.E. General Adel Ali Labib, Governor of Alexandria, the Ministry of Health, Egypt, Suzanne Mubarak Center, the Library of Alexandria and Alexandria Eye Hospital for their participation in and support for the World Sight Day celebration and for providing the political support necessary to eliminate avoidable blindness in Egypt.

I would also like to thank all those present with us today for their invaluable support for prevention of blindness activities in Egypt and the Region. This includes, among others, the Alexandria Chamber of Commerce, Al-Noor Magrabi Foundation, the Arab Medical Union, Alexandria University, the Egyptian Association for the Prevention of Blindness, Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services (CEOSS), Rotary International and the media.

I would like to urge you all to continue, and indeed increase, your efforts to ensure that access to eye care is equally available to both men and women. I hope this event will be a fruitful and an important step on the road to eliminating avoidable blindness in Egypt.