



**WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION**

**PRESS**

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## **WHO LAUNCHES PROJECT TO PREVENT BLINDNESS IN CHILDREN**

**Geneva** - Every minute, one child goes blind somewhere in the world. Half of these cases could be avoided. That means it is possible to save 250,000 children from darkness every year.

The World Health Organization today announced the launch of a Project for the prevention of blindness in Children. The Project is financially supported by the Lions Clubs International Foundation, under the auspices of its Lions SightFirst Programme.

"Lions \$3.75 million donation represents a major first step towards achieving the global elimination of avoidable blindness in children," said Dr Derek Yach, Executive Director for Non-communicable diseases. "WHO greatly appreciates the contribution from Lions Clubs International Foundation."

Of the half million children who go blind every year, three out of five die either from the causes that led to blindness, in the first instance, or from other deprivations. An estimated 1.5 million children currently live with blindness.

"Investing in children from the earliest years is not charity," says Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, Director-General of the World Health Organization. "It is the best way to ensure long-term development. This holds especially true for children's sight."

In terms of absolute numbers visual loss in the older populations takes a heavier toll. However in terms of "years of blindness", the burden of blindness in childhood is only second to that from cataract, which is the most important cause of global blindness.

Blindness and severe visual impairment have far reaching social, economic, and personal implications. When it occurs in children, it also poses serious barriers to the development of the child at a formative stage.

Primary health care approaches such as immunization against measles and rubella, better nutrition, especially with regard to vitamin A, timely prophylaxis against eye infections in the new-born from diseases such as gonococcal infection, and the avoidance of harmful eye medicines, could all contribute to minimising childhood blindness.

Surgical interventions would be necessary in conditions such as cataract, corneal opacities and glaucoma in childhood. Besides specialised training needed to equip surgeons to treat these conditions, early detection and increased access to treatment are essential to prevent irreparable damage to the eyes of children.

The correction of refractive errors and the provision of low vision care would be additional activities that would be addressed. Teamwork at all levels becomes a key element for success.

The five-year project will focus on training of health personnel for both prevention, early detection and treatment in 30 countries in all WHO Regions. It will also establish child friendly "Centres for Sight of Children" in these countries.

While the project would be executed by the World Health Organization, member governments, the members of the Lions Clubs International at all levels and other Non Governmental Organizations, will participate in project activities.

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