



INTERNATIONAL AGENCY  
FOR THE PREVENTION OF  
BLINDNESS



## PRESS RELEASE

### Simple Intervention Halves Global Blindness and Saves Millions

A report released today in the 'American Journal of Ophthalmology' asks if we can afford the increasing burden of treatable blindness.

Professor Allen Foster of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and Professor Kevin D Frick of Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, warn that global blindness is set to increase over the next 20 years, from 44 million affected individuals to 76 million. In their paper 'The Magnitude and Cost of Global Blindness: An Increasing Problem That Can Be Alleviated' they explain that US\$102 billion can be saved, and 100 million people prevented from going blind, over the next 20 years through the successful implementation of a global programme called VISION 2020: The Right to Sight - a joint programme of the World Health Organisation and International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness. Their study identifies the potential effect on global productivity of successful interventions aimed at eliminating blindness from five diseases: cataract, trachoma, onchocerciasis, vitamin A deficiency and refractive errors, all of which are prevalent in poor communities.

Mike Whitlam, CEO of VISION 2020: The Right to Sight says: 'This is a growing global tragedy that is costing individuals and the world too much. Do we just sit around and pretend that it is not happening? Governments must take note of these costs because for a small investment in blindness prevention they can stop this tragedy and save billions of dollars'.

If current trends continue the world's population will increase from 6.1 billion in 2000 to 7.5 billion in 2020, with the proportion of people over 65 year predicted to grow from 7% to 9% of the population. This will almost double of the number of blind individuals worldwide. Frick and Foster state that VISION 2020 will reduce the prevalence of blindness worldwide, from 44 million in 2000, to 24 million in 2020, despite world population growth. Shockingly, without VISION 2020, 76 million people will be blind in the year 2020 of which more than half will be blind from curable cataract.

Professor Allen Foster said, 'In the developing world an equivalent of half of the UK population are blind today because they cannot afford or access a cataract operation which would restore their sight, give them independence and an opportunity to be a breadwinner again. At the same time their children suffer from infections and vitamin deficiencies which lead to blindness yet are preventable through simple low cost medical treatments'.

The largest impact VISION 2020 has on the number of people going blind is on those aged 15-64, in other words, the working population. At present 25 million people in this age

bracket are blind and without VISION 2020 this number is estimated to reach 43 million by the year 2020. The VISION 2020 programme aims to reduce this figure to 13 million. This of course has a huge economic impact on a country. By eliminating avoidable blindness in this age group, the productivity of the workforce will be enhanced, increasing the opportunities open to those who would have been blind and their potential carers. Carers often include children who are as a result prevented from going to school, thus limiting their potential productivity.

Frick and Foster also found that if one includes those people who are partially sighted the economic savings are more than doubled to over \$200 billion. Can we afford not to ensure that VISION 2020 is implemented as successfully as possible?

Ends

## **NOTES TO EDITORS**

The interventions outlined in the report would save US\$102 billion in lost productivity over the next 20 years, and prevent 100 million cases of blindness

Since its launch in 1999, VISION 2020: The Right to Sight, a global initiative to help eliminate needless blindness by the year 2020, has made great progress in eliminating many of the causes of avoidable blindness, many of which are associated with poverty and lack of access to quality eye care services

Prevention and treatment interventions for vision loss are among the most cost effective health interventions currently available, including cataract surgery, prevention of trachoma, ivermectin for the treatment of river blindness, measles immunization and vitamin A supplements for the prevention of childhood blindness, and the provision of spectacles for individuals with refractive errors (e.g. myopia)

Every five seconds one person in our world goes blind..... and a child goes blind every minute

There are 44 million blind people and 135 million with low vision, comprising a total of 180 million people with significantly poor vision.<sup>1</sup>

80% of blindness is avoidable (either treatable 60% or preventable 20%)

90% of the world's blind people live in developing countries; there are at least nine million blind people in India, six million in China, and seven million in Africa

The International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB), was established in 1975 as a coordinating, umbrella organization to lead an international effort in mobilizing resources for blindness prevention activities. Its first major achievement was to promote the establishment of a WHO Programme for Prevention of Blindness, with which it has remained strongly linked. More information can be found at [www.V2020.org](http://www.V2020.org).

VISION 2020: The Right to Sight comprises of Task Force and Supporting Members:

Task Force:

International Centre for Eyecare Education  
ORBIS International  
Al Noor Foundation  
International Federation of Ophthalmological Societies (IFOS)  
Christian Blind Mission International  
International Trachoma Initiative  
Sight Savers International  
Helen Keller Worldwide  
Lighthouse International  
IMPACT – EMRO  
Operation Eyesight Universal  
The Fred Hollows Foundation  
World Council for Optometry

World Blind Union – Founding Member of IAPB but non-financial contributing Member of VISION 2020

Supporting Members:

American Academy of Ophthalmology  
Swiss Red Cross  
Asian Foundation for the Prevention of Blindness  
Lions Clubs International Foundation  
SEVA Foundation  
Foundation Dark and Light Blind Care  
The Canadian National Institute for the Blind  
Vision 2020 Australia  
VISION 2020 UK  
Agenzia Internazionale per la Prevenzione della Cecita  
The Carter Centre

<sup>1</sup>These numbers are based on 1995 population estimates

**For further information, or to set up interviews with Professor Allen Foster, please contact:**

**VISION 2020: The Right to Sight**

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