
80% OF VISUAL IMPAIRMENT CAN BE AVOIDED OR CURED

Geneva - World Sight Day, VISION 2020, is giving governments around the world tools to help prevent and treat millions of cases of blindness. Globally, an estimated 40 to 45 million people are blind and 135 million have low vision. But 80 per cent of visual loss can be prevented or cured, say the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB), which jointly support VISION 2020: The Right to Sight.

VISION 2020 is launching a CD ROM Tool Kit, which provides practical and technical guidance and support for governments and health professionals to develop National Prevention of Blindness Plans. VISION 2020: The Right to Sight aims to eliminate avoidable blindness by the year 2020.

"The latest research shows that the numbers of people who needlessly become blind are increasing. WHO is committed to reversing that trend," says WHO Director-General Dr LEE Jong-wook. "The cost of education, rehabilitation and lost productivity due to blindness has a significant impact on individuals, families, communities and nations - particularly in the poorest areas of the world. WHO will support countries in delivering the right to sight."

The majority of blindness - an estimated 90 per cent - occurs in developing countries. The leading causes of avoidable blindness and visual impairment are cataract, trachoma, river blindness, some conditions in children, such as vitamin A deficiency and retinopathy of prematurity, and the lack of glasses and low vision aids.

This year, governments around the world showed their commitment to VISION 2020 by unanimously adopting a resolution on Elimination of Avoidable Blindness at the 56th World Health

Assembly in May 2003. The resolution urges all governments to develop and evaluate National Prevention of Blindness Plans, with a view to implementing them by 2007.

The global initiative has already helped over a hundred member countries initiate national level VISION 2020-related projects and activities working towards the achievement of the Vision 2020 goal. The Tool Kit, which was developed to help countries follow through on the WHA resolution, aims to give those involved in developing and implementing national plans the necessary evidence-based information, templates, data and research knowledge.

VISION 2020 is a joint initiative of WHO and the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB). Launched in 1999 in Geneva, VISION 2020 includes other UN agencies, governments, eye care organizations, health professionals, philanthropic institutions and individuals working in partnership to eliminate avoidable blindness.

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