

VISION 2020: the Right to Sight

Since the estimates of the 1990s, new data based on the 2002 global population show a reduction in the estimated number of people who are blind or visually impaired, and those who are blind from the effects of infectious diseases, although there has been an increase in the number of people who are blind from conditions related to longer life spans. This new information underscores the need to modify the health care agenda to include the management of diseases that are now becoming more prevalent.

In 2002, more than 161 million people were visually impaired, of whom 124 million people had low vision and 37 million were blind (Table 1). These figures are the first global estimates since the early 1990s and have substantially updated the epidemiological data.

New Patterns of Blindness

Success in tackling the infectious causes of blindness combined with changes in the world's population have caused a dramatic shift in the patterns of blindness around the world. Worldwide, cataract continues to be the leading cause of avoidable blindness.

While cataract, which causes 47.8% of global blindness, still poses the major challenge in the effort to eliminate avoidable blindness, other age-related conditions such as glaucoma (12.3%), age-related macula degeneration (AMD; 8.7%), and diabetic retinopathy (4.8%) have now begun to predominate.

The extent of the global burden of visual impairment in 2002 is not strictly comparable with the previous estimates of 1990, which indicated that 148 million people were visually impaired, of whom 38 million were blind. While the 2002 world population has increased by 18.5% since 1990, the population aged 50 years and older has increased by nearly 30% and is more prominent in developing countries. Taking into account the changes in world population during the past 12 years, the extent of blindness and visual impairment in 2002 appears to be lower than was projected — 37 million instead of the projected 52 million. However, visual impairment is not distributed uniformly throughout the world, with more than 90% of the world's visually impaired people living in developing countries.

Global Challenges

Several global challenges require further attention as an ever-increasing number of

older people are at risk of visual impairment. The global disparity and inequity in the availability of eye health care services still fails to prevent and control an overwhelmingly increasing magnitude of avoidable blindness in the highly populated poorest parts of the world. However, the past decade has seen an upsurge in the intensity and efficiency of prevention of blindness activities in most parts of the world where blindness and visual impairment are public health problems. Impressive successes with elimination of blindness efforts have been noted in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.

The Global Initiative for the Elimination of Avoidable Blindness — VISION 2020: the Right to Sight — was launched in 1999 with the goal of helping member countries plan and develop sustainable national capacity of their eye health systems as an integral part of the national health system, based on the principles and practice of primary health care.

The latest figures point towards a new agenda for this initiative. Interventions against cataract still need to be intensified to reach affected but so far unserved populations. In addition, health planners will need to include the means to manage the diseases that are now becoming more prevalent. Glaucoma, AMD, and diabetic retinopathy need to be addressed by making available existing and new treatment methods and drugs. Monitoring and evaluation continue to play an essential part.

Further Reading

1. World Health Organization Fact Sheet Number 282; November 2004. www.who.int/
2. Resnikoff S, Pascolini D, Etya'ale D, et al. Global data on visual impairment in the year 2002. Bull WHO 2004;82: 844-851.

Table 1. Global estimate, in millions, of visual impairment by World Health Organization region in 2002

	Africa	Americas	Eastern Mediterranean	Europe	Southeast Asia	Western Pacific	Total
Population	672.2	852.6	502.8	877.9	1590.8	1717.5	6213.9
Number of blind people	6.8	2.4	4.0	2.7	11.6	9.3	36.9
Number of people with low vision	20.0	13.1	12.4	12.8	33.5	32.5	124.3
Number of people with visual impairment	26.8	15.5	16.5	15.5	45.1	41.8	161.2