

Vision 2020: Progress Report

BY GULLAPALLI N. RAO, MD



It gives me great pleasure to have Gullapalli N. Rao, MD, present an overview of the work of the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness in this month's Tackling World Blindness. Dr. Rao is the force behind the L. V. Prasad Eye Hospital in Hyderabad, India; one of the greatest eye care institutions in the world. Dr. Rao has gone on to unite many other institutions, governments and nongovernmental organizations into a united effort to overcome needless blindness.

—Geoffrey Tabin, MD, Section Editor

The International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB; Hyderabad, India) is an umbrella organization that links professional bodies, nongovernmental organizations, educational institutions, corporations, and national programs for the prevention of blindness. In 1999, the World Health Organization (WHO; Geneva, Switzerland) and the IAPB launched "Vision 2020: The Right to Sight," a global initiative for overcoming preventable blindness by the year 2020. Vision 2020's primary goals are to (1) control sight-stealing diseases such as cataract, trachoma, and diabetic retinopathy; (2) develop human resources to provide much needed eye care, and (3) provide the infrastructure and technology needed to deliver eye care.

The IAPB helped lobby the WHO and governments to spread awareness of the significant morbidity inflicted by world blindness, 75% of which is avoidable or treatable. Specifically, visual impairment is the sixth leading cause of disability in the world. Cataract surgery and blindness prevention remain among the most cost-effective health interventions.

Without Vision 2020, an estimated 76 million people might go blind by the year 2020. If the full initiative is successfully implemented, we may be able to reduce this number to 24 million in the next 13 years.¹ In 2005, Vision 2020 released *The State of the World's Sight*, a document summarizing the progress the initiative has made toward its goals over the past 5 years.²

Produced in three parts, *The State of the World's Sight* addresses a range of audiences—from government decision makers to individual supporters, all of which have supported Vision 2020 in some capacity between 2005 and 2006.

RESOLUTION PASSED

On May 27, 2006, the WHO adopted a resolution on Prevention of Avoidable Blindness and Visual Impairment (WHA 59.25) during the 59th World Health Assembly in Geneva, Switzerland. This resolution was the culmination of a concerted effort by IAPB members and more than 70 national governments lobbying for greater support to Vision 2020.³ Resolution WHA 59.25 asks member states and affiliated agencies to:

- reinforce efforts to define national Vision 2020 plans;
- mobilize country-level funding to support Vision 2020;
- include the prevention of blindness in national development plans and goals;
- integrate prevention of blindness into primary health care;
- develop and strengthen eye care services and integrate them into the existing health care system;
- include visual health in the training and retraining of health workers; and
- make available, essential medicines and supplies needed for eye care.

The WHO was also asked to give priority to the prevention of blindness and to:

- provide necessary support to member states, particularly for training eye care personnel;
- strengthen regional, sub-regional, and international cooperation; and
- report on Vision 2020's progress every 3 years.

The IAPB has also overseen progress in obtaining funding and support for its programs as well as raising awareness of its goals.

CORPORATE CONTRIBUTIONS

A number of corporations have become partners in Vision 2020's efforts, including Alcon Laboratories, Inc. (Fort Worth, TX), Bausch & Lomb (Rochester, NY), Carl Zeiss Meditec, Inc. (Dublin, CA), Standard Chartered Bank (London, UK), and Merck & Co., Inc. (Whitehouse Station, NJ). Some of these contributions are described below.

Carl Zeiss Meditec, Inc., has pledged an annual contribution of \$200,000 to strengthen one Vision 2020 training center in each of the seven WHO regions. The IAPB's Human Resource Working Group will be responsible for developing these centers over the next 6 years according to a process outlined in a memorandum of understanding between the IAPB and Carl Zeiss Meditec, Inc.

In observance of its 150th anniversary, Standard Chartered Bank established the "Seeing is Believing" program with a pledge of \$6 million. The bank will work with the IAPB to produce a number of programs over the next 3 years.

In 2006, the Champalimaud Foundation (Lisbon, Portugal), an organization that supports cutting-edge medical research, became a patron of Vision 2020. In addition to pledging \$260,000 annually and establishing a major \$1.3 million research reward, the organization has expressed interest in supporting programs in Portuguese-speaking (Lusophone) countries in Africa and East Timor.

On December 12, 2006, the IAPB, in conjunction with Deutsch Bank (Frankfurt, Germany) and Ashoka, a not-for-profit social entrepreneurial organization, launched the Eye Fund. This organization will provide loans, loan guarantees, and equity investment to support the development of affordable, profitable, and accessible eye care for the 4 billion people worldwide who make less than \$1,500 per year.

AFFILIATED ORGANIZATIONS

More information about the organizations mentioned in this article is available at:

Ashoka: <http://www.ashoka.org/>

Carl Zeiss Meditec, Inc.: <http://www.meditec.zeiss.com/>

Champalimaud Foundation:
<http://www.fchampalimaud.org/>

Deutsch Bank: http://www.db.com/index_e.htm

International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness: <http://www.iapb.org/>

Vision 2020: The Right To Sight:
<http://www.v2020.org/>

RESOURCES

Vision 2020's informational resource "Developing an Action Plan, Version II" is now available in Arabic, English, French, and Spanish. The tool kit is based on the 2003 World Health Assembly resolution and contains invaluable information on developing, implementing, and evaluating National Prevention of Blindness Plans.

The IAPB's new full-color booklet, "Blindness, Poverty and Development: The Impact of Vision 2020 on the UN Millennium Development Goals" ⁴ focuses on the economic implications of visual impairment. This and other IAPB publications can be downloaded from the Vision 2020 Web site.

ANNUAL EVENTS

World Sight Day is an annual event gazetted by the United Nations that is observed on the second Thursday of October each year. Created to focus world attention on the problem of global blindness, it became an official Vision 2020 event in 2000. It is now the major international public relations and advocacy event on Vision 2020's annual calendar. A full report of the 2006 World Sight Day is available on the Vision 2020 Web site.

CONCLUSION

Overall, Vision 2020: The Right to Sight is making significant progress on several fronts. During the past 5 years, the initiative's efforts have fostered greater awareness of the problems associated with blindness and visual impairment, increased the availability of resources, and improved worldwide access to quality eye care. These successes, however, only underscore the need to continue the endeavor in the future if we want to meet our goal of eliminating avoidable blindness by 2020. ■

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1. Frick KD, Foster A. The magnitude and cost of global blindness: An increasing problem that can be alleviated. *Am J Ophthalmol.* 2003;35:471-476.
2. World Health Organization. State of the World's Sight: Vision 2020: the Right to Sight: 1999-2005. Available at: <http://www.v2020.org/page.asp?section=0001000100070008>. Accessed January 23, 2007.
3. Prevention of Avoidable Blindness and Visual Impairment (WHA 59.25). Available at: www.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA59/A59_R25-en.pdf. Accessed January 25, 2007.
4. Blindness, Poverty and Development: The Impact of Vision 2020 on the UN Millennium Development Goals. Available at: <http://www.v2020.org/page.asp?section=000100010015>. Accessed January 23, 2007.