

Blindness and visual impairment is a major public health problem for the elderly people. The World populations are ageing, positive as it is, however this trend bring about different economic, social and health challenges in terms of ensuring better life conditions to a vulnerable segment namely the older people who need better health care services. While, in later life, their income reduces due to retirement and inability to earn money and they become dependant to their families and the cost of health care increases.

VISION 2020-The Right to Sight initiative was launched 1999 by WHO and the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB) to reduce blind population. Today, most of the blind population are elderly. Ensuring the older people Right to Sight is a fundamental goal for which all partners, foundations and organizations concerned with both eye care and health of elderly should work together to achieve.

A major step in this direction was taken by the International Alliance for VISION 2020-'The Right to Sight' initiative that dedicated the world sight day 2008 (9 October) to the issue of vision impairment in older people under the slogan" Eye on the Future: Fighting vision impairment in later life"

The WHO regional Office for the eastern Mediterranean in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and Population, Egypt, IMPACT-EMR, IAPB , national and international partners involved in the prevention of blindness in the presence of the Media will observe this occasion in an event due to be held on Thursday, 9 October 2008 at its premises in Cairo.

It is worth noting that 80% of the blind population are over the age of 50 years and around 90%

of the blind population live in low-income countries, where older people often face barriers to health care including eye care.

Globally, the world available data indicates that around 314 million people are visually impaired (37 million are blind, 124 million with low vision and 153 million with refractive errors), In EMR around 5.3 million are blind and over 37 million are visually impaired causing a huge economic burden to the families and community and society. In Egypt over 700 000 of the population are blind. Sadly enough, around 75 % of blindness cases could have been prevented, treated or cured by cost-effective interventions. However; it is unjustifiable or acceptable that the suffering of all these people should continue.

Around 60% of 5.3 million blind population is due to cataract and the leading cause of blindness in older people. Yet, it can be cured with simple, cost-effective operations, which cost only US\$ 50, and can be easily performed by an outpatient surgical procedure. Unfortunately, many of the blind due to cataract had no access to undergo this operation.

In spite of the limited resources, WHO/EMRO along with its partners has supported over 5000 cataract surgeries in the priority countries namely; Afghanistan, Sudan, Somalia and Yemen, but further generous support is urgently needed from all sources to eliminate the blindness due to cataract in the Region. Other blinding conditions affecting older people are refractive errors, diabetic retinopathy, macular degeneration (AMD) and glaucoma.

Due to the improvement of life style and health care, the world populations are ageing, individuals are living longer and blindness from chronic conditions is also rising. As a result, numbers of older people suffering from blindness resulting from chronic diseases, like diabetes are increasing.. Uncorrected refractive errors, which can be easily diagnosed and corrected by a pair of spectacles, and can restore sight to most of these people.

Nevertheless, significant progress has been achieved on some countries in the Region. Dr Hussein Gezairy, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean expressed appreciation for the initiative recently announced by H.E. President of Sudan to support over US\$ 30 Million for strengthening eye care and prevention of blindness programme in Sudan. He highlighted another initiative launched by His Highness Sheikh Mohamed Ben Rashed of Dubai to provide eye care services to one million people on H.H personal expenses. The Regional Director also acknowledged the steps taken by the Pakistani government to ensure providing eye care to the most deprived and rural areas in the country by expanding eye care to the

district level.

Dr Hussein A. Gezairy thanked all partners who are involved in the prevention of blindness activities in the Region particularly Egypt namely; Lions Clubs International Foundation, Rotary Clubs, Universities, Arab Medical Union, Al Noor al Maghrabi Foundation, ,Alexandria Chamber of Commerce, National Eye Centre, National Eye Research Institute, Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services (CEOSS), Ophthalmologic societies and others,

“We need more generous support and contribution from other leaders to eliminate the avoidable blindness in this Region. WHO is seeking support for around 2million dollars to reduce blindness in priority countries. We note with appreciation the great efforts exerted by many partners specially IMPACT–EMR chaired by HRH Prince Abdul Aziz Bin Ahmed Al Saud ” Dr Gezairy said.

“Older people are important members of our families and communities. Vision loss can be difficult for older people to contribute to their full potential. ‘active ageing‘ helps older people to keep health, and healthy eyes help older people to stay active. Keeping in mind that “The right to sight” has no age limit” he added

HRH Prince Abdulaziz bin Ahmed Al Saud, H.E. Minister of Health and Population, Egypt and HE Minister of Health, Morocco are invited to the celebration along with Ambassadors of Gulf countries, European Union, other Member States , experts and invitees representing

organizations concerned with fighting blindness and providing eye care.

Saturday 17th of May 2025 12:47:05 PM