In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Address by

DR HUSSEIN A. GEZAIRY
REGIONAL DIRECTOR
WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION

to the
VISION 2020 REGIONAL PLANNING WORKSHOP
and
LAUNCHING OF VISION 2020 IN EGYPT
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Your Royal Highness, Your Excellency, Ladies and Gentleman,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to the regional planning workshop for Vision 2020 here at WHO’s Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean in Cairo, and to share with you this historic occasion, the launching of the global initiative of Vision 2020? The Right to Sight in Egypt. I wish to extend my sincere thanks to His Royal Highness Prince Abdul Aziz Bin Ahmed Bin Abdul Aziz, the Regional Chairman of the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness and Chairman of the Board of IMPACT-EMR, and to His Excellency Professor Mohammed Awad Tag El-Din, Minister of Health and Population of Egypt, for their presence and for the support they have given to the Vision 2020 regional planning workshop.
Vision is the most important of our senses as the majority of our day-to-day activities are vision-related. Many find it difficult to comprehend what it would be like to lead a life without vision; blind people need assistance to carry out their daily-life routines and are thus dependent on their families as well as on the community, society and ultimately the country.

Unfortunately, today there are an estimated 50 million blind people and around 180 million visually-impaired, worldwide. Two-thirds of these conditions are either preventable or curable. If we do not take active steps now, the number of blind will double within the next 25 years.

In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, an estimated 6 million people are blind and over 22 million people suffer from visual impairment. 80% of this estimated blind population live in countries that are mainly characterized by large population, low income and relatively weak health care infrastructure. In addition, some of those countries continue to suffer from the consequences of war and civil strife. In order to enhance and strengthen the present prevention of blindness activities in the Region, the Regional Office has organized this regional planning workshop. I hope that during the next 4 days, participants will share their experiences and will come up with recommendations and plans of action for the reduction of avoidable blindness in this Region under Vision 2020.

Ladies and Gentleman,

Blindness has profound human and socioeconomic consequences in all societies. The cost of lost productivity, rehabilitation and education of the blind constitutes a significant economic burden, particularly in many developing countries. Furthermore, blindness is often associated with lower life expectancy. Spending on blindness prevention programmes is a worthwhile investment.

In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, cataract, complications of trachoma, corneal opacity, uncorrected refractive error, low vision, glaucoma, childhood blindness and diabetic retinopathy are the major causes of blindness. Cataract remains the major cause of blindness (approximately 60%), in almost all the countries in the Region, including Egypt. The Regional Office has highlighted the fact that most of these conditions are responsive to simple treatment,
yet very few have access to that treatment. His Royal Highness, the Chairman of the Board of IMPACT-EMR, has recommended and countries have committed themselves to addressing the backlog in cataract surgery on an urgent basis as part of their action towards prevention of blindness in the Region. I am very pleased to note there has recently been a substantial increase in the cataract surgery rate in many countries following the launch of Vision 2020, namely in Bahrain, Jordan, Pakistan, Oman and Sudan. Nevertheless, still more needs to be done.

Trachoma continues to be another global and regional cause of preventable blindness. Elimination of blinding trachoma is a priority in the Eastern Mediterranean Region under the WHO campaign for the Global Elimination of Trachoma (GET2020). The possibilities of eliminating blinding trachoma have already been shown in Oman and in Morocco, where the national trachoma elimination programme recently brought trachoma experts from all over the world together. The Regional Office as well as headquarters is working closely with the national government and nongovernmental organizations for the possible elimination of blinding trachoma from Oman and Morocco by 2005. In Saudi Arabia, efforts over the years have resulted in a reduction in active trachoma and efforts are now underway to completely eliminate the disease. Rapid assessment of trachoma has also recently taken place in Pakistan. The Regional Office will coordinate with all governments and nongovernmental organizations as well as any other interested parties to achieve the goal of the global elimination of blinding trachoma by 2020.

Refractive errors, which can easily be corrected by a pair of spectacles, is another simple and easily preventable cause of blindness. We need to work together with primary health care workers, refractionists and schoolteachers to make refractive services easily available and affordable to the community. Approximately 20 million people in our Region are in need of low vision care. This number will increase as the population ages. Low vision services are not available in many of the Region’s countries. I hope this will be highlighted during this workshop and that the necessary recommendation to overcome the problem will be formulated.

Childhood blindness is another priority. Five countries in this Region, namely Egypt, Islamic Republic of Iran, Morocco, Sudan and Pakistan, will receive support from the Lions Clubs International Foundation over the next five years for a defined population in their
countries. We need to extend those activities to other countries as well and hope that emphasis will be given to such issues in the whole Region.

Glaucoma and diabetic retinopathy are emerging causes of blindness which I hope we will pay more attention to in the coming years.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

To reduce the blind population in the world, in 1999, WHO, in partnership with the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness and other nongovernmental organizations, launched Vision 2020? The Right to Sight. The goal of this initiative was to address the major preventable or treatable causes of blindness, particularly in the developing countries, in order to stop a further increase in the global burden of blindness. Vision 2020 aimed at intensifying and accelerating the current prevention of blindness activities, through disease prevention and control, training of personnel, strengthening of the existing eye care infrastructure, use of appropriate technology and mobilization of resources, so as to achieve the goal of eliminating avoidable blindness by 2020.

I am pleased to draw your attention to resolution WHA56.26, on the elimination of avoidable blindness, passed by the Fifty-sixth World Health Assembly in May 2003. The resolution urges Member States to commit themselves to supporting the global initiative by setting up a national vision 2020 plan by 2005 in partnership with WHO and in collaboration with nongovernmental organizations and the private sector, and to support the mobilization of resources for eliminating avoidable blindness.

Ladies and Gentleman,

The launch of Vision 2020 in Bahrain, Egypt, Lebanon, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Sudan, United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Yemen is firm indication of the interest in and determination to eliminate avoidable blindness. It is worth saying that Egypt has a large number of human resources, especially ophthalmologists. With proper planning and utilization these resources can achieve the goal of Vision 2020 and could even reduce avoidable blindness before
the year 2020. I hope that other countries in this Region will also soon launch Vision 2020 in line with the global initiative and prevent further blindness in their nation.

I would like to thank the regional and international nongovernmental organizations, and collaborating centres for their active participation in this workshop and I hope that they will form a regional coordination group to support this initiative effectively. I would particularly like to mention the support of IMPACT/EMR, Al Noor Foundation, Al Bassar International Foundation, Nadi Al Bassar, Lions Clubs International Foundation, CBM, Sight Savers International, International Trachoma Initiative, Fred Hollows Foundation, The Carter Centre, King Khaled Eye Specialist Hospital, Al Shifa Trust, Leyton Rahmatullah Benevolent Trust, Al Israh Foundation, Pakistan Institute of Community Ophthalmology and other organizations as that are working together in partnership with WHO in the countries of the Region. A collective effort and genuine partnership is necessary for progress that will lead to achieving the goal by the year 2020. I would also like to thank Prof K. Konyama of Japan for travelling a long way to support this meeting.

Once again I would like to thank His Royal Highness and His Excellency, the Minister of Health and Population of Egypt for their support for the Vision 2020 initiative.

Finally, I thank all the guests and participants, and assure you of our continued cooperation. I wish all success.

God bless you all.