



In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Address by

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WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION

to the

WORLD SIGHT DAY CELEBRATION

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His Excellency, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to the Regional Office to celebrate World Sight Day 2007, which is dedicated to the important issue of “vision for children”. As we all know, vision is certainly the most important of our senses and 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.

Children are the most precious resource for families, representing the family’s future and hope. Consequently, blindness and visual impairment have far-reaching social, economic and personal implications. When a child goes blind, a serious barrier to the development of the child is created at a formative stage. Blindness in a child is a tragedy for the child, the family and for society. Childhood blindness that could have been prevented or cured is an even greater tragedy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Unfortunately in the world today a child goes blind every minute. There are around 1.4 million blind children worldwide, and millions more are visually impaired. In the Eastern

Mediterranean Region, around 200 000 children are blind. Approximately three-quarters of blindness in children occurs in low-income countries where it has a far greater economic impact than in wealthy countries. In developing countries, 60% of the children will die within one year of becoming blind and the rest will, on average, spend 40 years without sight. 90% of blind children receive no schooling and the majority will not grow up to achieve their full potential. But what is most important of all is that childhood blindness is the second largest cause of blind person years, following cataract. A recent research on the economic cost of blindness indicates that blindness costs the community billions of dollars in terms of lost productivity, care, rehabilitation and special education. Approximately one-third of the cost is estimated to be incurred by blindness in children.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

About 50% of the causes of blindness in children are avoidable. Furthermore, the main causes of blindness in children are also important causes of child mortality and their control will have a positive impact on childhood survival. For example, vitamin A supplementation has been shown to reduce childhood mortality by 23% in vitamin A deficient populations. Other important causes of avoidable blindness in children are measles, ophthalmia neonatorum, harmful traditional practices, infective corneal ulcers, cataract, glaucoma and retinopathy of prematurity.

Uncorrected refractive errors, which can be easily diagnosed and corrected by a pair of spectacles, are the most important cause of visual impairment in school age children. We need to work together with primary health care workers, refractionists and schoolteachers to make refractive errors and low vision services easily available and affordable to children and to the community.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In 1999, WHO, along with the International Agency for Prevention of Blindness (IAPB) and other nongovernmental organizations, launched Vision 2020–The Right to Sight, a global initiative to eliminate avoidable blindness. The control of childhood blindness has been included as a priority for support.

We need to apply different approaches to deal with the variety of causes of blindness in children. One of the important approaches is integration of eye care within the primary health care system. Primary health care has made a great contribution to the prevention of childhood blindness, through vitamin A supplementation during routine immunization, supplementary immunization activities, immunization against measles and rubella, timely prophylaxis against eye infections in newborns and advocacy for better nutrition and avoidance of harmful eye medicine, as well as the school screening programme for refractive errors.

Services for conditions that need surgical intervention, such as corneal opacities, cataract, glaucoma and retinopathy of prematurity, are limited to just a few centres in this Region, while the lack of trained human resources, especially paediatric ophthalmologists and refractionists, and limited training facilities are major obstacles. Unless the lack of human resources is addressed, it will be extremely difficult to eliminate avoidable causes of childhood blindness.

Where prevention and treatment measures fail, providing education and occupational skills to blind children minimizes the detrimental impact of vision loss on the lives of affected children and their families. I hope national governments and international organizations will come forward to expand access to education for the blind.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Eastern Mediterranean Region needs more support from all sources, and we need to expand partnerships. Recently, the Alexandria Chamber of Commerce joined our initiative to fight blindness in Egypt and the Region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank H.R.H. Prince Abdulaziz Bin Ahmed Al Saud, Chairman IMPACT/IAPB-EMR for promoting World Sight Day every year to strengthen advocacy and eliminate avoidable blindness. I would also like to thank all those present with us today, particularly Al-Noor Foundation, the Arab Medical Union, the National Eye Centre, the Research Eye Institute, Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services, Rotary International and other regional and international nongovernmental organizations for their support. I would specially like

to thank the Lions Clubs International Foundation for their support of the elimination of childhood blindness project in five countries, namely Egypt, Islamic Republic of Iran, Morocco, Pakistan and Sudan. There are many other projects going on in Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and Saudi Arabia to eliminate childhood blindness, and I hope many more will join.

Let us work together to eliminate blindness and visual impairment for the children.

God bless you all.