New WHO estimates reveal downward trends in blindness and visual impairment worldwide

- New statistics indicate global reduction
- Shift from infectious to chronic conditions
  - Asian regions worst affected

Recently released World Health Organization (WHO) data indicate that prevalence of visual impairment has been significantly reduced to 285 million. Of these, 246 million have moderate to severe visual impairment, while an estimated 39 million people are blind.

This reduction reflects the investment of governments and their international development partners in improving eye health services and strategies. Socioeconomic developments in many countries have also contributed to these welcome trends.

Key Global Facts:

- A total of 285 million people are visually impaired
- Of these, 39 million are blind
- 246 million have moderate to severe visual impairment
- 63% of those with low vision and 82% of blind people are over 50 years of age¹

Of the six WHO world regions, South East Asia and Western Pacific account for 73% of moderate to severe visual impairment and 58% of blindness.

¹ The SEAR and WPR regions account for around 50% of the world’s population (Source: WHO, World Health Statistics, 2010)
This is all the more remarkable given that the number of people over 50 years old – the age group most affected by visual impairment – continues to grow rapidly, increasing by 14% in the past 5 years\(^2\).

International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness CEO, Peter Ackland said,

> “These figures are really encouraging as for the first time we have a clear indication of the downward trend in the absolute number of visually impaired people in the world. Undoubtedly much of this success is attributable to the efforts of the many governments and international agencies involved in the VISION 2020: The Right to Sight global initiative.

While enjoying this success we must remember that there are still some 285m people in the world who are visually impaired and that approximately 80% of these cases could be cured, treated or prevented in the first place – so there is no room for complacency – instead we need to redouble our efforts to support VISION 2020.”

Challenges remain to achieve the VISION 2020 goal of eliminating the main causes of avoidable blindness by the year 2020. The top three causes of blindness in the 2010 estimates are cataract, glaucoma and age-related macular degeneration, while uncorrected refractive errors are the main cause for moderate to severe visual impairment. This highlights the recent trend towards a decline in infectious diseases, while chronic diseases, which affect both the developed and the developing world, are rising steeply.

**Note:**

While the new data clearly indicate reduced prevalence, no direct comparison can be made with previous data as the methodology to estimate the prevalence of visual impairment and blindness is different from the one used in previous studies. For more information, please visit the WHO PBD website: [http://www.who.int/blindness/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/blindness/en/index.html)

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Notes to Editors:

About VISION 2020: The Right to Sight

VISION 2020: The Right to Sight is the global initiative for the elimination of avoidable blindness and a joint programme of the WHO and the IAPB. It was launched in 1999 and has an international membership of NGOs, professional associations, eye care institutions and corporations.

VISION 2020, through the WHO, IAPB and its member organisations, provides technical support and advocacy to prevention of blindness activities worldwide. At the national level, a strong partnership among the Ministry of Health, national and international NGOs, professional organisations, and civil society groups – brought together in a national prevention of blindness or VISION 2020 committee – should facilitate the development and implementation of effective and sustainable national eye care plans.

VISION 2020 seeks to eliminate the main causes of avoidable blindness in order to give all people in the world, particularly the millions of needlessly blind, the right to sight.

The goal is to eliminate avoidable blindness by the year 2020. In the long term, the initiative seeks to ensure the best possible vision for all people, thereby improving their quality of life. This goal should be achieved through the establishment of a sustainable, comprehensive eye-care system as an integral part of every national health system.

For more information on VISION 2020, please visit its website at: http://www.vision2020.org/main.cfm

Please see a VISION 2020 video for more information on its initiatives here: http://www.vision2020.org/image/videos/v2020_lo_res_for_review.mov

About the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB):

- The IAPB promotes the global initiative VISION 2020: The Right to Sight.
- IAPB was established in 1975 as a coordinating, umbrella organisation to lead international efforts in prevention of blindness and vision impairment activities.
- IAPB’s first major achievement was to promote the establishment of a WHO programme for the Prevention of Blindness, which is embodied in the VISION 2020 joint initiative.
- IAPB now has more than 110 members, including international development NGOs, disability organisations, global professional peak bodies, academic institutions and corporations.
- IAPB’s vision is a world in which no one is needlessly blind or visually impaired and where those with unavoidable vision loss can achieve their full potential.
- IAPB’s mission is to eliminate the main causes of avoidable blindness and vision impairment by bringing together governments and non-governmental agencies to facilitate the planning, development and implementation of sustainable national eye care programmes based on the three core strategies of disease control, human resource development and infrastructure development, incorporating the principles of primary health care.

- IAPB works to support the formation of national prevention of blindness committees and programmes, led by governments with input from the WHO, local and international NGOs. These now exist in over 100 countries.