

Highlights from the 7th General Assembly, International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness, Dubai 2004



Clare Gilbert, Chairperson of the IAPB Programme Committee, with Victoria Francis, Coordinator of the rapporteurs

Approximately 550 eye health professionals from nearly 80 countries gathered in Dubai for the 7th General Assembly of the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB). General Assemblies, held every four years, provide participants the opportunity to break from their busy routines and see the 'broader' picture of global prevention of blindness, update their knowledge, share experiences and unite around the VISION 2020 agenda. Participants contributed high quality Free Papers and 67 posters illustrating research findings and operational aspects of VISION 2020.

Partnerships in eye care

The theme was 'Partnership in VISION 2020'. Partnerships within the World Health Organization (regional and national structures), International and National Non governmental Organisations, professional groups (ophthalmologists and optometrists) and the private sector received detailed attention. Additionally, this General Assembly raised awareness of partnerships with industry, the corporate sector and the media.

Dr Kaschke of the Carl Zeiss Group outlined a vision of long-term partnerships with the corporate sector founded on four pillars: technical and financial support, management expertise, marketing and public relations capability and a global presence.

This decade has seen some remarkable partnerships with pharmaceutical companies. Working in partnership with the WHO, World Bank, and International NGOs, Merck and Co. Inc. is committed to donating Mectizan® – *for as long as needed, wherever needed* – to help eliminate onchocerciasis as a major public health problem. The International Trachoma Initiative (ITI) is another partnership founded between Pfizer Inc. (producers of the antibiotic azithromycin) and the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation (a charitable foundation) with the mission of eliminating blinding trachoma by the year 2020.

The Standard Chartered Bank's 'Seeing is Believing' project began as a partnership with Sight Savers International and now includes four other NGO members of VISION 2020 in an initiative planning to implement flagship projects in Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam.

The BBC World Service Trust's involvement in trachoma communication campaigns demonstrates that partnerships in media programmes can contribute to building capacity in production skills for print and electronic media.

Progress with VISION 2020 priority diseases

Cataract

- Data from the global database of Cataract Surgical Rates (the indicator used to measure the service delivery) of countries in WHO regions show a wide range in cataract surgical rates, with some countries in Asia achieving high outputs
- affordability, availability and quality of cataract surgical services are being addressed.

Trachoma

- Trachoma control programmes in more than 37 countries
- definition of UIG (Ultimate Intervention Goals) and AIO (Annual Intervention Objectives) in most endemic countries
- public-private partnerships, for example, Pfizer has increased its Zithromax donation from 5 million to 135 million doses
- links between trachoma control and PRSP (Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers)
- Morocco, the Gambia, and Oman are approaching elimination goal.

Onchocerciasis

- Integration of Community Directed Treatment with Ivermectin (CDTI) into primary health care and control of neglected diseases
- emphasis should now be given to reach those affected in conflict and post-conflict areas and in villages with very poor infrastructure
- continuing research to find macrofilaricides.

Childhood Blindness

- Increased awareness
- decline in corneal scarring due to VAD control programmes and improved measles immunization coverage
- rapid assessment methods
- increasing numbers of training institutions for paediatric ophthalmology.

Refractive Errors and Low Vision

- more data on the prevalence in different situations
- existence of the technology to solve this problem
- increasing efforts to deliver services through personnel, capacity and infrastructure.

These successes have been supported by human resource development and technology within VISION 2020.

Care for people who are blind

Our responsibility to care for people who are blind can be overlooked. Christopher Friend's presentation of the Alan Johns Memorial lecture (in which the audience sat in total darkness), brought this issue home

powerfully. Eye care professionals need to be better oriented towards the feelings, needs and aspirations of people living with blindness. We should endorse, promote and act on a rights-based approach to inclusion.

Looking to the future

Professor Sommer identified research opportunities in support of VISION 2020 as: epidemiologic risk profiles; operations research aimed at applying existing technology; and basic biology to understand causal pathways.

Dr Geeta Vemuganti described research in stem cell biology, and the exciting possibilities it offers for the future.

Dr Barbara Silverstone and Mary Ann Lang demonstrated ways in which information technology can be used not only to provide information to patients, clients and providers, but also to bring them together through telemedicine.

Professor Irene Maumenee described the use of human genome information in genetic blindness and outlined how information from genetic studies could be used in genetic counselling, prenatal diagnosis, pre-implantation diagnosis, population screening and developing treatment methods to reduce the impact from genes causing hereditary blindness.

The Assembly concluded with inspiring words from the Immediate Past President, Dr Hannah Faal, and the President Elect, Dr Gullapalli Rao.

In her President's Review, Dr Hannah Faal reminded the audience that IAPB's deadline of 2020 puts urgency into everything we will be doing.

"Let each family in every community know enough about vision to take responsibility for ensuring their own eye health. Let us position ourselves to fit into and gain from the explosion in technology, particularly information and communication technology, without losing sight of the way communities have traditionally communicated with each other... We must be prepared to change and remain relevant to our populations."

The incoming IAPB president, Dr Gullapalli Rao, highlighted the tremendous activity that has taken place since the launch of VISION 2020 in 1999 and emphasised the challenges that lie ahead. Dr Rao outlined a four-tier pyramid 'Infrastructure Model' for a sustainable eye care delivery system beyond the year 2020. Dr Rao also emphasised that in delivering eye care we should promote excellence and equity, so that everyone in the world has that fundamental Right to Sight.

Acknowledgments

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