This is likely to have major implications for India, which is estimated to be home to a quarter of the world's blind population. Awareness about the eye complications of diabetes can play an important role in encouraging people to seek timely eye care.

We conducted a survey using a 20-point questionnaire among 1,000 diabetic patients who attended our out-patient department between October 2001 and March 2002. We assessed awareness about the eye complications of diabetes and asked patients how awareness could be increased.

Eighty-six per cent of patients were aware that DM could affect many parts of the body; 84 per cent knew that DM could affect the eye. Among those who were aware that DM could affect the eye, 36 per cent learnt this through the media, 32 per cent from other eye specialists and 30 per cent from their general practitioners or physicians. Among those who were aware that DM could affect the eye, 51 per cent did not know exactly which part of the eye could be affected, 28.3 per cent thought that cataract was the main eye complication, and 19 per cent thought that DM mainly affected the 'nerves in the eye' (presumably retinopathy). Around 50 per cent of the patients knew that routine eye checks were necessary even if DM was well controlled, while the remainder thought that routine eye examinations were not necessary in that case. To increase knowledge, better media coverage was suggested by 36.8 per cent. The rest suggested better communication from physicians (32.7 per cent), eye specialists (19.8 per cent), and health and paramedical workers (10.7 per cent).

Awareness is not the same as knowledge. Hearing about a problem is awareness, but understanding the causes or treatment of a disease, for example, is knowledge. Eighty-four per cent of the patients were aware that DM could affect the eye, so awareness is quite high. But knowledge levels were lower: only 46.9 per cent of those interviewed knew that retinopathy was related to the control of DM, and only 40.3 per cent knew that it was related to the duration of DM. Among those who were aware that DM could affect the eye, 51 per cent did not know what the eye complications could be. As this study was done in an eye hospital, knowledge levels amongst diabetic patients in the general population are likely to be lower.

The control of visual impairment from diabetes requires good disease control and regular eye examinations. Screening diabetic patients for retinopathy poses considerable challenges, particularly in a country like India where the numbers are large and many diabetic patients are unlikely to be aware that they need regular eye examinations. This study shows that, as a first step, there is a need to increase awareness and knowledge of the potentially sight-threatening complications of diabetes.

GLOSSARY

Glossary: research and training

Case-control study: a study in which people who already have a certain condition are compared with people who do not

Cross-sectional study: a study in which a population or sample is assessed at one point in time

Curriculum (pl. curricula): the subjects taught in a course of study (e.g. an MSc in community eye health)

Dissertation: a long, written essay or report describing research that is submitted as a requirement for an advanced academic degree; also called a thesis

Endemic: describes a disease that is constantly present, to a greater or lesser degree, in a population living in a particular area

Ethical approval: independent review of the scientific merit and implications of a study regarding the dignity, rights, safety, and wellbeing of research participants

Field work: research done in the real world (i.e. not in a laboratory)

Focus group discussion (FGD): a qualitative method to obtain in-depth information on concepts and perceptions about a certain topic through spontaneous group discussion of approximately 6–12 persons, guided by a facilitator

Incidence: the number of deaths or new cases of a condition, symptom, or injury that arises during a specific period of time, such as a year

In-depth interview: a face-to-face conversation to explore issues; conducted without using a structured questionnaire

Literature review: a summary and explanation of key studies relevant to a proposed project

Logbook: a notebook used to record the dates when decisions were made or actions were taken

Methodology: the precise design of a study, including the methods used

Multi-stage cluster sampling: constructing a sample from a population by first creating and selecting clusters (stage one), and then choosing elements from within the selected clusters (stage two)

Narrative data: verbal answers that take the form of a story or explanation, or which describe a series of events

Pilot study: a smaller version or trial run of a larger study that is conducted in preparation for that study; can involve pre-testing or 'trying out' a research tool such as a data-collecting form

Population: the group being studied, e.g. children of school age in Zimbabwe

Population-based survey: a survey where the sample is representative of the population being studied

Prevalence: a measure of the frequency of a disease or condition at a particular point in time, usually expressed as the number of cases per 100 people examined

Prospective study: a study in which events or cases are observed or studied as they occur, or in which human subjects are identified and followed forward in time

References: a short note detailing the source of information or a quoted passage

Reflexivity: an awareness of the researcher's contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process, and an acknowledgment of the impossibility of remaining 'outside of' one's subject matter while conducting research

Research protocol: a document describing in detail how a research study is to be conducted in practice, including the methodology, a plan for analysing the results, and a budget

Research question: the main question a research project aims to answer

Retrospective data/study: a study that looks at events that took place in the past; can involve extracting information from medical records or interviewing patients about past events or behaviour

Sample: a group of people or elements selected from the population being studied

Supervisor: the person who is responsible for guiding the individual(s) doing a research project

Variable: a broad term encompassing what is measured in a research project; demographic variables, for example, describe participants' age, sex, and socio-economic status; outcome variables might include visual acuity after cataract surgery or the number of people accessing services after a health education intervention.