

On Occasion of World Sight Day 2018, Lets Pledge and Work Together to Eliminate Avoidable Blindness

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The International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB) and many eye care organizations, professionals, beneficiaries and supporting public will be celebrating World Sight Day (WSD) today. WSD is an international day of awareness about avoidable blindness and its prevention, marked on the second Thursday of October every year. Set to commence on October 11th this year, the event tends to raise awareness against visual impairments and calls the international community to collaborate with the aim of eliminating blindness and its pertinent conditions that are avoidable. With a different theme every year, the sixth World Sight Day, set to observe on October 11th, 2018, is based on the theme, "Eye Care Everywhere."

A total 80% of people with vision impairment are avoidably so. Research shows that every dollar spent on eye health has a two-fold return on investment – in developing countries, home to 90% of all vision impairment, there is a four-fold return. Yet current estimates put the number of people living with significant visual impairment at 285 million, 39 million of whom are blind. IAPB and its members and partners recognize that governments are key to ensuring access to quality eye health services and eliminating avoidable blindness. Facilitated by the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB), the World Sight Day occupies a significant place in the eye health calendar that engages with the public and private organizations across the globe to engage with each other with the common goal of drawing attention towards vision-related issues and eye health.

According to the clinical findings, there are about 36 million blind people across the globe. [1] If delved deeper, four out of five cases of blindness are actually avoidable. This raises a serious concern in the global eye care community that 80% of the people have unnecessarily lost their sight. Further statistics presented by the World Health Organization state that there are 217 million people who live with severe visual impairments like MSVI. [2] According to the study of Pascolini and Mariotti, a quarter of the entire burden of blindness and visual impairment is shared by India alone. [3]

The impairment is more common among the tribal population residing in the country. The reasons identified by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs for this prevalence include under developing the economy, diverse cultural heritage, and geographic isolation. [4] Among other imperative reasons for the high rate of blindness in India include barriers to access eye care facilities, illiteracy, resistance towards

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wearing glasses, and poverty. [5] The findings of Murthy, Vashist, and John, *et al.*, and Guruprasad, Krishnamurthy and Narendra, *et al.*, state that 82.4% cases of blindness in India were treatable and 6.1% preventable. [6,7] This denotes the significant need of spreading awareness regarding eye health and care. While the risk factors and causes of blindness and visual impairment prevailing in India may not be known exactly, but the need to curtail these preventable visual conditions are exceedingly necessary.

Looking at the alarming rate at which blindness and visual impairment is becoming popular, events like WSD and collaborations between national and international organizations has become mandatory. Bearing in accordance this need, the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness and the World Health Organization has laid down the Vision 2020: The Right to Sight, a Global Initiative. The World Sight Day is based on a distinct theme every year that contributes to the purpose of the Global Initiative. The theme of 2018, "Eye Care Everywhere," is meant to draw international attention towards basic eye health issues faced by people globally. [8]

The purpose of the global event is to explore solutions to these issues to ensure that everyone, irrespective of their geographical location, cultural background, and economic status, is able to have access to sight. Working under the theme of "Eye Care Everywhere," eye health organizations are expected to spread awareness and share information about eye health, vision care, and curbing the conditions like preventable blindness and visual impairments.

A total of 75% of the world's visual impairment is avoidable. [9] People suffer from vision problems unnecessarily only because they do not have proper and immediate access to eye health facilities. The findings of Leasher, Bourne, and Flaxman, *et al.*, state that nearly 834,000 out of the 350 million people suffering from diabetes acquire blindness due to glaucoma and diabetic retinopathy. [10] Both these conditions are treatable, and the consequential blindness preventable, if the right treatment is offered at the right time. Patients suffer because they do not have immediate access to expert and are unable to get their condition diagnosed.

Moreover, in a country such as India, the geographical location plays an important role in delaying the diagnosis; hence, the rate of blindness and visual impairment is escalated. India faces a massive challenge in terms of a shortage of professional, competent ophthalmologists. The rural areas and the younger population are getting largely afflicted. According to the Chief Executive of the Indian Vision Institute, there are only 45,000 optometrists available in the country against the requirement of 125,000. [11] This indicates the severe shortage that India is facing and how the population remains deprived of receiving primary eye care.

The population that suffers most is the one living in the rural and underprivileged areas. Majority of the cases for blindness and visual impairment is achieved from these areas and are continuing to rise because people living there do not have access to sufficient primary eye care. There isn't enough professional staff allocated in these regions that can conduct the initial screening and testing to identify the risk of visual impairments. The root cause is the insufficient ophthalmologists in the country.

To address this issue, it is imperative that it should be considered as a critical health problem at a national level. Emphasis should be done on encouraging medical graduates towards embracing ophthalmology and its related specialties so that there are enough professionals to cater to the need of time. Besides ophthalmologists, there is need to train medical staff that can conduct primary screening and testing in the rural and remote areas. Once the crucial cases for blindness and visual impairment are identified, they can be referred to the professional ophthalmologists. This can help in diminishing blindness cases substantially.

Aside from increasing ophthalmological human resources, there are other measures that can be taken as well to address this alarming issue of rising blindness cases. Regulating affordable spectacles can help with the visual conditions excessively. Considering that wide portion of India's population constitutes to underprivileged people who, on daily basis, struggle to meet the basic necessities of life, it is mandatory to understand that eye care may not be their top preference because they cannot afford it. Offering low-cost spectacles can help them maintain better eye health and reduce the ratio of visual impairment.

To ensure that eye care is accessible to everyone everywhere, it can be regulated through the integration of smart technology in the care process. Using software and hardware applications, eye care diagnostic systems can be made available to the general public to which they can easily and immediately get access to and stay abreast of their visual health. Such diagnostic procedure is not only effectual in terms of location and time but financially, too, as it costs only a fraction of other diagnostic tools currently used in the process.

Telemedicine technique is another potential area that can be tapped by the eye specialists to ensure that the purpose of “Eye Care Everywhere” is sufficiently met. Taking into consideration the financial barriers that stand in the way of eye care for patients, eye care funds regulated with the collaboration of private and public organizations, can prove to be effectual in making eye health accessible for everyone.

The critical issue of blindness and visual impairment in the rural areas of India can only be addressed effectively if the eye care services are made accessible to the people living in these areas. The issue prevails because the rural population is not only deprived of sufficient eye health services but is also suffering from a lack of awareness pertaining to the importance of eye care. Since they do not have access to the professionals within their territorial proximity, they choose to overlook their building visual impairments until they reach a critical condition where it becomes hard to treat. To address such condition, it is imperative, to begin with establishing vision centers and mobile eye care camps to which the people living in rural areas can immediately access. [12,13] People from local areas can be given specialized training and can be allocated managerial roles in these vision centers. These camps and centers can be affiliated with hospitals which can help patients with the treatment planning and execution. Another imperative measure that can be taken to ensure eye care in rural areas is regulating outreach initiatives. They can be planned to spread awareness in the rural communities and educate people on eye care health. [14] These initiatives can outline the preventive measures necessary for curbing the risks of eye-related diseases and visual impairment.

The World Sight Day 2018 tends to bring together the professionals, sponsors, and individuals from diverse background across the world to join hands for the purpose of highlighting the impact of eye health in normal lives. This themed event is not restricted to medical professionals or organizations associated with eye care. It invites people and societies from all backgrounds to take part in the cause.

The photo competition organized by IAPB is an initiative that compels the photographers to capture the essence of the necessity of eye care from their vision and perspective. Photographs can be a mean of visual depiction pertaining to how imperative eye health is. For the eye doctors and healthcare organizations, the World Sight Day 2018 requests participation in the global pledge aimed to support blindness prevention efforts.

To fulfill the theme of “Eye Care Everywhere,” the eye doctors, health organizations and welfare societies can work together to identify the root cause of blindness prevailing in their areas and see the factors that contribute to the visual impairments. Having these elements classified, they can strategize the measures that can help curtail the pervasiveness of the vision impairment-related conditions. Using their knowledge, experience, and skills, the eye care health professionals can conduct awareness programs like conferences, training programs, and workshops, in which they can educate people about the necessity of eye care.

Commencing outreach programs can be another effectual way of propagating awareness and identifying potential cases of preventable blindness. [15] Establishing medical camps in tribal and remote areas to offer eye examination and offering simplified training about eye care measures can play a significant role in fulfilling the theme of “Eye Care Everywhere”.

To elaborate the celebrations of the World Sight Day 2018, social media can be used as a powerful tool to spread awareness about the cause of the event. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram can be considered as persuasive means to carry out strong campaigns to regulate the message pertinent to eye care necessity and education. Online contests can be held to ensure greater audience engagement and interest retention. Aside from this, day-long events can be organized that can commence public speaking sessions about eye health and fund-raising can also be carried out to sponsor treatments for visually impaired patients who are unable to afford the cost.

The global initiative taken by the World Health Organization and the International Agency for Preventable Blindness is a highly potential measure that possesses the tendency to bring down the blindness and visual impairment rate.

With India having 25% share of the global blindness and visual impairment population, it has become a significant responsibility for the eye care professionals and organizations to stand for the objective set by IAPB. Considering the fact that blindness is a health condition that serves as an economic burden for a developing country like India. With 70% of the population residing in the rural areas, they are dependent on the state-run medical schemes and programs for the cataract blindness and other visual impairment treatments. [16] This ultimately increases the burden on the government and impacts the economy negatively. To cater to this problem, it is imperative that the medical professionals, private organizations and public sectors come together and make a collaborative effort to fight against this preventable health issue. On this World Sight Day, it is mandatory to take a pledge to make sincere and determined efforts to diminish preventable blindness cases and support the people to improve their quality of life. In summary, World Sight Day is an annual day of awareness held on the second Thursday of October to focus global attention on blindness and vision impairment. It is coordinated by the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB) as part of the VISION 2020 Global Initiative.

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