



DELHI DECLARATION ON OPTOMETRY AND BLINDNESS PREVENTION IN INDIA

Preamble:

An estimated 456 million people of India's population of 1.12 billion people require vision correction (spectacles, contact lenses or refractive surgery) to be able to see and function for learning, work and life in general. Twenty six million people are blind or vision impaired due to eye disease. A further 133 million people, including 11 million children, are blind or vision impaired simply from lack of an eye examination and an appropriate pair of glasses (uncorrected refractive error).

Vision impairment due to uncorrected refractive error causes serious disability and lost opportunities. As Dr. Catherine Le Gales-Camus (WHO Assistant Director-General for Non-communicable Diseases and Mental Health) said on World Sight Day in 2006, *"Without appropriate optical correction, millions of children are losing educational opportunities and adults are excluded from productive working lives, with severe economic and social consequences. Individuals and families are pushed into a cycle of deepening poverty because of their inability to see"*.

The direct and indirect cost including lost productivity due to uncorrected refractive error in India has been estimated at \$23 billion per year (and I\$269 billion globally).

Optometry is recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO) as an independent profession through its ongoing official relations with the World Council of Optometry (WCO) – the international optometric organization which represents almost 300,000 optometrists from 87 member organizations in 47 countries. The WCO defines Optometry as follows: *"Optometry is a healthcare profession that is autonomous, educated, and regulated (licensed/registered), and optometrists are the primary healthcare practitioners of the eye and visual system who provide comprehensive eye and vision care, which includes refraction and dispensing, detection/diagnosis and management of disease in the eye, and the rehabilitation of conditions of the visual system."* Optometry as a profession has the primary public health responsibility for eliminating uncorrected refractive error.

To provide excellent vision care to all the people of the country, India needs 115,000 optometrists. India currently has approximately 9,000 4-year trained optometrists and an estimated 40,000 2-year trained eye care personnel.

Key leaders from the Indian and global profession of Optometry gathered in New Delhi, India from 11 to 13 April 2010 to discuss the development of Optometry and Blindness Prevention in India. The meeting brought together representatives from the Indian Optometric Association (IOA), the Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry (ASCO), the International Centre for Eyecare Education (ICEE), the Brien Holden Vision Institute, as well as international optometric leaders from Australia, Africa and Europe who are experienced in optometric education and legislation.

The following outcomes and statements resulted from this Delhi summit.

The attendees of this meeting recognise that:

- Uncorrected refractive error is the major cause of avoidable vision impairment, and the second most common cause of blindness in India and the world generally
- In India, an estimated 41 million people are blind or vision impaired from uncorrected distance refractive error (153 million globally)
- Uncorrected presbyopia accounts for another 91 million people vision impaired people in India (517 million globally, 94% of whom live in the developing world)
- The number of people in India who are vision impaired due to eye disease is estimated to be at least 26 million, of whom almost seven million are blind (globally 161 million, including 37 million who are blind)
- It is estimated that almost half the population of India (i.e. 469 million people) have some form of refractive error, and that around 133 million of them are blind or vision impaired as a result of lack of correction, including 11 million children
- Refractive error is easily diagnosed and measured and is the most treatable cause of vision impairment – in most cases, an eye examination and a pair of spectacles is the only form of treatment needed
- India has made great contributions in developing systems of delivery of quality eye care to those in need
- Millions of people in India (and the rest of the world) still do not have access to basic eye care and refractive services – mainly due to a shortage of trained personnel to provide them.

We further acknowledge that:

- Approximately 85% of all vision impairment and 75% of blindness globally could be avoided, prevented or cured if the appropriately trained personnel and eye care facilities existed
- The World Health Organisation (WHO) and the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB) launched the global initiative *VISION 2020: the Right to Sight* to eliminate avoidable blindness and vision impairment
- Blindness and vision impairment place a significant economic burden on families, communities and society at large – due to lost productivity, as well as the cost of education and rehabilitation
- Optometrists are primary healthcare practitioners of the eye and vision system who can successfully manage the leading cause of vision impairment (i.e. refractive error) and can also help alleviate the burden of other causes of blindness through diagnosis, management and referral
- As primary eye care practitioners, optometrists have a vital role in detecting potentially serious eye diseases such as cataract, glaucoma and age-related maculopathy, as well as general health conditions such as hypertension and diabetes.

We commit to:

- Achieving recognition of Optometry as an independent profession in India, as it is by the World Health Organization (WHO) through its official relationship with the World Council of Optometry (WCO)
- Registration of all Optometrists and optometric levels, including 2- and 4-year trained optometrists, refractionists, optometric and ophthalmic technicians and technologists, vision technicians, etc through an independent statutory authority, such as an Optometry Council
- Developing appropriate 'Grandfather' clauses to allow all levels of optometry as described above to be registered through a common Optometry register based on recognition of academic qualifications, prior learning, skills and experience
- Providing excellent vision care to all patients seeking Optometric services, including refraction, prescribing and dispensing of vision aids such as spectacles, contact lenses and low vision devices and management of ocular coordination and perception problems
- Assisting in the development and provision of accessible, affordable and excellent vision care services to all people of India – regardless of their geographical location or socio-economic status
- Developing competent human resources in Optometry to meet the current and future eye care needs and reduce the burden of vision impairment and blindness in India

- Working towards the standardization of knowledge and competency-based undergraduate Optometric education
- Development and acceptance of a skills/competency matrix as the basis for registering all optometrists
- Targeting a 4-year training program as the only registerable qualification for new optometrists beyond 2020 or at a time defined by legislation
- Developing human resources in Optometry by providing bridging courses and continuing education for the improvement of the knowledge and skills of all practising optometrists and the movement of optometrists to higher levels of competency
- Developing the scientific and academic discipline of Optometry, including the training of academics and researchers for Optometry who can conduct basic and clinical research, teach and publish at the highest levels.

The meeting was made possible through a grant from the Australia-India Council.