

**WORLD HEALTH DAY**  
**7 April 1976**

## **FORESIGHT PREVENTS BLINDNESS**

**MESSAGE FROM DR. HALFDAN T. MAHLER**  
**Director-General of the World Health Organization**

There are at least 10 million totally blind people in the world today. Millions more have such defective sight that they must be regarded as blind for the purposes of education, work, and social assistance. These numbers are increasing, and unless action is taken they could double in the next 25 years.

Throughout the developing world, two-thirds of this blindness is estimated to be preventable or curable. Even in the most advanced countries much of the blindness is preventable.

With the theme "Foresight Prevents Blindness," World Health Day, 7 April 1976 puts the spotlight on the darkness which envelops so many.

Prevention is important in all the world but particularly in the developing world, where most preventable blindness occurs—that caused by trachoma, xerophthalmia and onchocerciasis—and where cure is possible only to the few because of lack of adequate health services.

Early treatment will cure trachoma before the eye is damaged; administration of vitamin A to children will prevent xerophthalmia; vector control will prevent onchocerciasis.

Other more long-term measures also have a part to play in controlling eye infections—better sanitation, cleaner and more abundant water, improvement of personal and environmental hygiene.

In all parts of the world, simple measures would have an immediate impact on the problem. Education of health workers and parents on these measures is necessary. For example:

- Early detection and early treatment of eye trouble, especially in children. This means impressing on health workers and parents the importance of simple regular inspections.

- Provision of eye protectors for certain workers and insistence on their being worn; control of dangerous tools in industry; improvements in the safety of toys.
- Blindness caused by cataract could and should be treated on a large scale by simple and cheap operations in countries of high incidence.

To a large extent the resources are there; it is a question of utilizing them and putting men and money into their application.

Half a dollar will treat a case of trachoma — 5 dollars will remove a cataract — 12 US cents will buy enough vitamin A to protect a child from xerophthalmia for a year.

Many governments already have high-powered blindness prevention campaigns underway. We hope that many more will be encouraged to follow suit, and perhaps to accord still higher priorities to such campaigns. Loss of sight is not merely a personal tragedy for the individual concerned — it represents a marked loss in strictly financial terms for the national wealth of the country where he or she lives.

Prevention of blindness is a relatively uncomplex field of medical activity where we can say: the more funds and the more practical assistance we receive, the more positive good we can bring about in the world. Forewarned, forearmed, and with foresight, we can make sure that our World Health Day slogan has real meaning in every corner of our planet: Foresight *can* prevent blindness.

**MESSAGE FROM DR. HECTOR R. ACUÑA**  
**Director, Pan American Sanitary Bureau**

The road leading to prevention of blindness runs head-on into a labyrinth of complex social and economic woes, particularly in the developing countries. As we focus our attention on the prevention of blindness for this year's World Health Day, we should therefore think beyond narrow programs. We should renew our efforts, through our long-term programs, to wipe out illiteracy and improve socioeconomic conditions, actions which will increase the chances that poor families will seek health care, including care for prevention of blindness; to extend and improve the system for delivery of health care, particularly to rural areas, which includes educating health workers and patients on the importance of examinations to spot symptoms of blindness before the eye is irreparably damaged; to improve diets, particularly with the proteins and vitamin A which will prevent xerophthalmia, a major cause of blindness; to create better housing and sanitary conditions, which would eliminate much trachoma, another cause of blindness; to control certain vectors, which will reduce the problem of onchocerciasis, the third major blindness-causing disease; and to improve industrial hygiene, providing eye protection for workers in hazardous occupations.

Here in the Americas we may consider ourselves fortunate that blindness is not the severe problem it is elsewhere in the world. In some sections of Africa, the threat of blindness turns villages into ghost towns. Each year in India, 15,000

children under age six lose their sight. Nevertheless, blindness does cause considerable personal hardship and economic loss in many parts of the Hemisphere.

It has been estimated that two-thirds of the world's blindness is preventable, and that 20 percent is curable. This is not to imply that prevention and cure can be achieved easily. But we must use this occasion of World Health Day to reflect, to consider what more we can do, and to take special pains to assure that the prevention of blindness becomes an integral part of our health programs.