

A 2020 Vision: strategies for coping with blindness in the 21st century

Most causes of blindness are preventable, but developing countries with limited access to medical resources cannot treat them as readily as their more affluent Western counterparts. Since blindness is far more frequent in poorer areas, agencies like the World Health Organization (WHO) have been operating in the most heavily affected regions (e.g. India and China where blindness affects 1% of the population), hoping to prevent further impairment. A projected 1.2 billion people, three quarters of whom are living in developing countries, will be over the age of 60 by 2020. Of those, 54 million will lose most or all of their sight.

Two-thirds of those registered as legally blind in the developed world are over 65 years of age.

Though the incidence of visual impairment in developed nations will also increase over the next 15 years, organized efforts to educate about the subject have barely scratched the surface. This is not for a lack of trying, but until the West began "graying," visual impairment was a really low-incidence disability. While easily treated conditions like cataracts or preventable diseases like Trachoma account for much of the blindness in "the third world," the leading cause of visual impairment in North America and throughout most of Europe is Diabetic Retinopathy. Since most people do not perceive any immediate threat to their own sight, and probably do not know anyone who is blind (yet), awareness campaigns targeted at the general public usually end up impacting only a small fraction of those they reach..

While efforts at preventing avoidable blindness are important, especially in countries that lack the resources to rehabilitate their visually impaired citizens, demystifying it is equally important. The pervasive fear of blindness - and by extension, of those affected by it - has a major impact on how well newly blinded individuals can re-integrate into society. This issue is especially important when considering the burden put on Western taxpayers in supplying residential care for those who do not need it, or on the relatives of blind people in developing countries.

Agencies for the blind must continue to educate people about the potential for rehabilitation, but more importantly, members of the public must set aside their primeval fear and look blindness full in the face. Blind people can live fulfilling and independent lives. With the right kind of training, those who cannot be "cured" will still be able to function as productive members of society.

The first step is in recognizing that blindness need not be debilitating. While resources and opportunities have been distributed unevenly around the world, even those in the poorest countries could benefit from a greater level of social understanding and acceptance.