



Towards Universal Eye Health: A Regional Action Plan for the Western Pacific (2014–2019)

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CONTENT

Foreword	v
Towards Universal Eye Health: A Regional Action Plan (2014–2019)	1
Overview	1
Vision, goal and purpose.....	3
Cross-cutting principles and approaches	3
Objectives	5
Objective 1	5
Objective 2	6
Objective 3	9
 APPENDIX 1: National Indicators for Prevention of Avoidable Visual Impairment	 11
APPENDIX 2: Means of Verification and Important Assumptions	15
APPENDIX 3: Measurable Indicators of the Regional Action Plan	16
APPENDIX 4: WPR/RC64/R4 Blindness Programme Resolution	17



Foreword

Most people take the ability to see for granted. They cannot imagine how debilitating poor vision or blindness can be for individuals and their families. Individuals affected by the loss of vision are likely to require support within their household and within their community. Educational opportunities, gainful employment and productivity are severely compromised by poor vision or blindness. These problems are more pronounced among poor people who often lack access to basic eye-care or rehabilitation services.

The prevalence of visual impairment is alarmingly high. In 2010, 90 million people in the Western Pacific Region were visually impaired, including more than 10 million blind. While up to 80% of visual impairment can be treated or prevented, many policy-makers are not aware of the benefits and cost-effectiveness of simple interventions.

The lack of universal access to eye-care services has varying causes across the Western Pacific Region. Some countries lack the capacity to provide specialized health services and trained eye-care personnel. As a result, eye-care services may only be available in urban centres, beyond the reach of people who cannot travel far. Other countries may have sufficient trained eye-care personnel and infrastructure to provide comprehensive service; however, these services may be privatized and unaffordable for those most in need.

Consequently, approaches to improve access to quality eye-care services differ among countries, and even within countries. Some priority interventions, however, are relevant to most countries in the Region, especially low- and middle-income countries. These interventions include treatment for cataracts and refractive error.

Globally, three quarters of visual impairment is caused by uncorrected refractive error (42%) and cataracts (33%). Cataract surgery and eyeglasses are among the most cost-effective health interventions.

Vision loss from diabetes represents a growing challenge in the Region. Diabetic retinopathy ranks among the leading causes of vision impairment in Pacific island countries and areas. Advocacy is required to improve screening methods and foster preventative approaches.

Trachoma is the most common infectious cause of blindness. Although progress has been made towards elimination of the disease in some Asian countries, data from some Pacific island countries and areas indicate that the disease continues to be a public health problem.

Vitamin A deficiency is a public health problem in many low-income countries in the Region, especially Pacific island countries and areas, hitting hardest young children and pregnant women. Vitamin A deficiency is a leading cause of preventable blindness in children, yet highly cost-effective vitamin A supplementation is often minimal.

An issue commonly neglected in the Region is the lack of support for people with irreversible visual impairment. Few low-vision and rehabilitation services are available, especially in low- and middle- income countries. Where services exist, low awareness among patients and service providers commonly leads to underutilization and poor continuum of care.

The economic burden of visual impairment is substantial. In 2000, the global economic loss from visual impairment was US\$ 42 billion per year. That figure is expected to rise to US\$ 110 billion by 2020.

With cost-effective strategies available in the Region to reduce the main burden of preventable visual impairment, eye health requires the promotion of social and economic development, human rights and equity. Efforts to improve eye health should be integrated within general approaches for health systems strengthening to ensure cross-cutting benefits beyond a single disease focus, especially in low-income countries.

Towards Universal Eye Health: A Regional Action Plan for the Western Pacific (2014–2019) presents the first such plan for the Region. While its main objectives are aligned with the global action plan for the prevention of avoidable visual impairment, the plan provides a regional context for WHO support to help address specific needs in Asia and the Pacific. The plan provides a menu of recommended actions for Member States and WHO that can be prioritized and adapted to accommodate different contexts and settings in the Region.



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