

For Immediate Release

Thursday, October 8, 2009

Contact:

National Eye Institute
(301) 496-5248
neinews@nei.nih.gov

Statement from Paul A. Sieving, M.D., Ph.D., Director of the National Eye Institute, National Institutes of Health, on World Sight Day, Oct. 8, 2009

On World Sight Day 2009, the National Eye Institute (NEI), part of the National Institutes of Health, joins with groups around the globe to recognize vision as a public health priority. We at the NEI reaffirm our commitment to preventing and treating blinding eye conditions through scientific research and educational programs.

World Sight Day this year is dedicated to raising awareness of women and eye health. Worldwide, 314 million people are visually impaired, of whom 45 million are blind. Nearly two-thirds of people affected by vision loss are female.

Gender disparities in vision loss in the United States are partly related to the fact that women live longer than men, and are thus more susceptible to age-related eye diseases. In addition, females are at a higher risk for dry eye syndrome as well as several autoimmune diseases that affect the eyes, such as lupus, rheumatoid arthritis and multiple sclerosis.

Women around the world also may be at a greater risk for blinding eye conditions because social or economic factors prevent them from receiving equal access to eye care. This inaccessibility to eye health care is particularly detrimental in communities where a condition known as trachoma is prevalent. This eye disease is a leading cause of blindness worldwide, but it can be avoided and treated through health education, antibiotics and surgery.

Currently available treatments and educational strategies could be used to prevent or cure an estimated 75 percent of blindness worldwide. These include lifestyle factors such as stopping smoking, which is a risk factor for cataract and age-related macular degeneration, or reducing obesity, which is a risk factor for diabetic eye disease. Vision health could also be maintained

through improved access to health care, including regular, comprehensive dilated eye exams, which would facilitate early detection and treatment of eye diseases.

On World Sight Day 2009, we at the NEI acknowledge the impact of blinding eye conditions on women, men and children throughout the world. Through the National Eye Health Education Program and our support of scientific research, we will continue to work to reduce the impact of vision disorders worldwide, especially those that can be prevented and treated.

References:

Abou-Gareeb I, Lewallen S, Bassett K, Courtright P. Gender and blindness: a meta-analysis of population-based prevalence surveys. *Ophthalmol* 2001; 8:39-56.

The epidemiology of dry eye disease: report of the Epidemiology Subcommittee of the International Dry Eye WorkShop (2007). *The Ocular Surface*. 2007 Apr;5(2):93-107.

Resnikoff S et al. Global data on visual impairment in the year 2002. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 2004, 82:844–851.

World Health Organization. *Global Initiative for the Elimination of Avoidable Blindness: Action Plan 2006-2011*. Geneva, 2007.

###

The National Eye Institute, part of the National Institutes of Health, leads the federal government's research on the visual system and eye diseases. NEI supports basic and clinical science programs that result in the development of sight-saving treatments. For more information, visit www.nei.nih.gov.

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) — The Nation's Medical Research Agency — includes 27 Institutes and Centers and is a component of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. It is the primary federal agency for conducting and supporting basic, clinical, and translational medical research, and it investigates the causes, treatments, and cures for both common and rare diseases. For more information about NIH and its programs, visit www.nih.gov.

