



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

NIH News

National Institutes of Health

National Eye Institute

<http://www.nei.nih.gov>

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
August 24, 2005

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Photos and other materials are available for download in camera-ready format on the NEI Website: <http://www.nei.nih.gov/indo-us> collaboration.

Agreement Signed to Expand Vision Research Collaborations between the United States and India

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) today announced the signing of a United States-India Statement of Intent for collaboration on expansion of vision research. The agreement, signed by Dr. Maharaj K. Bhan, Secretary of the Department of Biotechnology (DBT) in India, and Dr. Elias A. Zerhouni, Director of the National Institutes of Health in the United States, symbolizes an increased commitment to joint collaborations on eye disorders.

"Our scientific collaborations with colleagues in India are strong. Through this agreement, they will become even stronger," said Dr. Zerhouni. "With the rising global burden of disability and suffering posed by eye disorders, partnerships such as the one we forged today are increasingly critical."

Dr. Bhan said, "The leaders of India, the world's largest democracy, are striving to improve the eye health of our people. We are very concerned about the toll of many vision disorders on our well-being. Through this collaboration, we are confident that India will gain important new knowledge for the protection of sight and for the prevention of vision loss."

Eye disorders are responsible for 3.1 percent of the global burden of disease, according to The World Health Report 2003 produced by the World Health Organization. These disorders rank ninth in Global Disease Burden, behind such

diseases as HIV/AIDS, malaria and perinatal conditions. Worldwide, more than 37 million people are blind. In India, the number is more than 12 million; in the United States, over 1 million. The societal cost of visual disorders and disabilities in the United States exceeds \$67 billion. For India, the World Bank committed nearly \$100 million to cataract blindness control programs from 1994 to 2001.

The National Eye Institute (NEI) has a historic relationship with India dating back to the 1980's. Dr. Paul A. Sieving, NEI Director, is building on earlier efforts through enhanced vision research collaborations. The agreement signed today follows two Indo-U.S. workshops on expansion of collaborative research held this year in India and the United States. With funding through a cooperative agreement with the NEI, the Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology arranged the workshops held in February and April.

The workshops explored and identified complementary scientific, intellectual and fiscal resources in the U.S. and India to enhance and accelerate clinical and basic vision research through active collaborations between research institutions and scientists in the two countries. Thirty delegates from 20 U.S. institutions and 25 delegates from five vision research centers in India held discussions in five different topical areas: molecular genetics of eye diseases; clinical aspects of genetic eye diseases; harmonization of clinical measurement techniques and terminology; translational physiology; and identification, development and exchange of research resources.

One of the most challenging issues is comparative genomics and the role of environment on gene expression. There is the need to understand how the same genetic defect leads to differing degrees of severity of eye disorders across the globe. Studying this requires populations with genetic and environmental diversity and cannot be satisfactorily attempted within the confines of one country alone. India and the U.S., each with its multiple ethnicities, are natural partners in this endeavor.

"These are the reasons why I am very enthusiastic about the potential for this agreement between India and the United States," said Dr. Sieving. "With their well-trained and dedicated eye researchers, India and the U.S. have the ability and the will to work together to tackle seemingly intractable problems through collaboration."

The agreement was signed at the Lawton Chiles International House on the NIH campus in Bethesda, Maryland and witnessed by members of the diplomatic corps as well as by NIH senior scientists. The agreement was developed jointly by the NEI and the DBT with support from Fogarty International Center, which plays a key role in advancing the NIH mission through international partnerships.



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The FIC, the international component of the NIH, addresses global health challenges through innovative and collaborative research and training programs and supports and advances the NIH mission through international partnerships.

The NEI, part of the NIH, is the Federal government's lead agency for vision research that leads to sight-saving treatments and plays a key role in reducing worldwide visual impairment and blindness. The NIH is an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

