

Role of Optometry and Optometrists in Promoting the Art, Science and Practice of Ophthalmology

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In the year 2019 world report on Global Visions, the World Health Organization (WHO) highlighted the following bitter truths.¹

1. Out of the enormous number of 2.2 billion people with vision impairment globally, vision impairment in one billion could have been prevented.
2. The disease is unequally distributed. It is much more common in low- and middle-income countries and in rural and elderly populations.
3. We are going to witness increase in demand for global eye care because of the rapid increase in population, ageing and the rapidly changing lifestyle.

To meet this challenge, WHO recommended with “Integrated people centered eye care, embedded in health systems and based on strong primary health”.² WHO, International Council of Ophthalmology (ICO) and the International Agency for Prevention of Blindness (IAPB) came up with a joint ultimate intervention goal, the “Global Action Plan” to convert their dream into reality which says that.³

1. A world in which no body is needlessly blind or visually impaired.
2. Where those with unavoidable vision loss can achieve their full potential, and
3. Where there is universal access through equitable distribution of comprehensive, high quality and sustainable eye care services for all.

This noble goal can only be achieved through appropriate global partnership and through appropriate district based comprehensive, integrated and sustainable high quality eye care services. To

achieve the goal, WHO has provided us with a formula of the following six building blocks.⁴

1. Situation analysis, research and development
2. Strong advocacy for resource generation
3. Necessary infrastructure development
4. Provision of well-trained eye care team
5. Provision of essential technology and
6. Efficient and effective management

The Human Resource team will consist of:

1. Ophthalmic specialists and sub specialists
2. Ophthalmic Allied health Personnel (OAHP)
3. Ophthalmic nurses and
4. Eye health care Managers

The OAHP team will consist of:

1. Optometrists
2. Orthoptists
3. Ophthalmic technicians and technologists and
4. Ophthalmic nurses

Why is the cadre of OAHP and specially optometrists so important? Because as recommended in the 2019 world report, we would like to see “people- centered eye care, embedded in health systems and based on strong primary health care, the care model of choice and scale it up widely. Such integrated, high quality and sustainable national eye care services for all countries should be;

- Available, accessible and affordable to all citizens.
- It should offer comprehensive eye care services covering the four elements of health care: prevention, promotion, medical and surgical interventions, and rehabilitation.
- It should be based on three tiers: primary, secondary, and tertiary.
- It must have a robust, efficient and effective referral system across the chain.
- The primary level needs to be renamed as family health care center for a defined unit of

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Population.

- These centers need to be well connected to the communities through the community health nurses in strong collaboration with optometrists.
- Immediately after birth, the community health nurse / optometrist will prepare the infant's health report which must include eye health and submit it to the family physician.
- These centers must also be well connected to the school health services.
- The optometrists must be an integral part of the school health team and must regularly submit the eye health care reports to the family physician.
- The vision of all primary school children must be checked on admission.
- Vision must be rechecked on entry to high school.
- The optometrists should be the first to detect all kind of anterior and posterior segments eye anomalies and refer it to the ophthalmologist well in time.
- The optometrist should be the first to detect refractive amblyopia or other causes of poor vision, report it to the family physician and consult the ophthalmologist. He /she can then continue to monitor the treatment efficiently and effectively.
- The optometrists must have reasonable expertise in ophthalmoscopy. They should be the first to detect congenital ocular anomalies, early glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy, retinal artery / vein occlusion; communities based ocular traumas and report it to the family physician for referral it to the concerned ophthalmologist.
- The optometrists should be responsible for the final refraction of all ophthalmic post-operative cases.
- The optometrists should provide the necessary low vision aids (LVAs) to all

people with untreatable vision impairment.

Such a well-coordinated approach will lead to highly efficient and effective eye care services across the board in all countries. But to achieve this noble goal, all countries will have to follow the principles of excellent integrated eye care system laid down by the WHO, ICO and IAPB. All countries will have to invest in eye care teams consisting of; subspecialists at centers of excellence, specialists in all districts supported by a well-trained team of allied health services. All the members of the team must be well trained through a chain of integrated ophthalmic human resource development centers across the country and certified by a national certifying agency. We would expect such well-trained individuals to be very well informed, reformed and even transformed. They will always be expected to do “the right thing, for the right reason, in the right way and at the right time. To keep pace with the rapidly evolved knowledge, skills and technology, these members of the eye care team must be supported by frequent refresher courses. The government must come out with strong retention strategies of such well-trained human resource through appropriate humanistic employees' salaries, promotions and other socioeconomic benefits. With such an efficient and effective planning, implementation and management of integrated national eye health system, the ultimate dream and goal of WHO, IAPB and ICO, “the Universal eye health care” will come true. All countries that succeed in achieving this marvelous goal in health sector will truly deserve to be proud of its achievement in the comity of nations.

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