Better eye care for all can bring economic benefits

Governments could add thousands of millions of dollars to the global economy simply by investing in eye examinations and the provision of glasses for some 703 million people who need them, according to a study published this month in the Bulletin of the World Health Organization.

The study estimates that 65,000 more optometrists, ophthalmologists, optical dispensers and other eye-care professionals would be needed to provide these services and that it would cost between US$ 20,000 million and US$ 28,000 million to train them and set up and run the eye care facilities needed.

“This is a drop in the ocean compared with the US$ 202,000 million in annual estimated losses in global gross domestic product due to the fact that these 703 million people are living with uncorrected refractive error,” says co-author Professor Brien Holden at the University of New South Wales in Australia.

Refractive error is a common eye disorder that results in blurred vision. The four main forms are myopia (near-sightedness), hyperopia (far-sightedness), astigmatism (distorted vision) and presbyopia (near vision impairment, which makes reading without glasses impossible for many). These cannot be prevented but can be diagnosed through an eye examination and treated with glasses – costing as little as US$ 2 a pair – contact lenses or surgery.
“Improving people’s vision could generate considerable economic benefits especially in low- and middle-income countries, where these problems are to a large extent not corrected, and could make a major contribution to global development,” he said.

Loss in productivity tells only part of the story, Holden said: “Children and adults with uncorrected refractive error face many health, economic and social effects, including poor vision, reduced education and employment opportunities, and social isolation.”

When uncorrected, refractive errors constitute the most common cause of vision impairment worldwide and the second most common cause of blindness.

Co-author on the paper, Kevin Frick, professor of health economics at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, said he hoped the results of the study would send a strong signal to governments around the world. “Governments face tough decisions over how best to use scarce resources. Now that we have evidence for the economic benefits of correcting refractive error, investing in eye care should be one of the easier decisions,” said Frick.

“The availability of dedicated eye-care professionals will provide the basis for developing accessible and affordable refractive services at primary health care level,” said Dr Silvio Mariotti, a WHO blindness prevention expert.

“This study highlights the need for countries to invest in the prevention of visual impairments from uncorrected refractive errors as a key component of the provision of eye care services to all those in need,” said Mariotti, referring to WHO Member States’ 2011 commitment to reform their health financing systems to move towards universal health coverage. “The study provides additional evidence for the need to develop human resources for the prevention of blindness as required by the WHO action plan for the prevention of avoidable blindness and visual impairments 2009–2013.”

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