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**STATEMENT BY THE INTERNATIONAL AGENCY FOR THE
PREVENTION OF BLINDNESS**

By Professor Richard Le Mesurier, FRCS, FRCOphth

The International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB) thanks all Member States in the WPR for their support for the WHO Action Plan for the Prevention of Blindness and Vision Impairment at this year's World Health Assembly.

While some might express surprise that this could be adopted in a year of pandemic crisis, it is testament to a global and communal common sense, where the value for Vision is held high. It reflects an acceptance that to preserve or restore vision is almost the most cost-effective health intervention a government can take.

With only 11 more years until 2020, IAPB is aware that time is short to attain the agreed goal of the Global Initiative for the Elimination of Avoidable Blindness: VISION 2020 The Right to Sight, despite many significant advances in most countries in this Region.

This new WHO Action Plan sets the stage for WHO and IAPB to work even more closely together in this Region.

We hope, therefore, that Eye Health and Vision will figure more overtly in Country Cooperation Strategies, in National Strategic Health Plans and that there will be greater familiarity with and support for VISION 2020 implementation from all WHO Country Offices.

To this end we are working closely with the Australian Government (AusAID) and WHO to enable funding for an experienced WHO VISION 2020 Regional Coordinator to be based at WHO's Regional Office in Manila. We are close to concluding these discussions and hope the VISION 2020 Coordinator will be able to commence work early in 2010.

While considerable activity has continued in many of the Region's countries towards improving Eye Health and Vision Services, three in particular stand out:

1. The Australian Government's Avoidable Blindness Initiative allocated AUD 45 million for addressing avoidable blindness in the Asia Pacific area and a further AUD 59 million for addressing Australian indigenous and remote eye health issues, particularly blinding trachoma and Diabetic Eye Disease.

2. The Government of the People's Republic of China's Cataract programme is allocating (with Provincial contributions) around RMB 1 billion (USD 146.5 million) for cataract surgery targeting the intervention at Country Hospital level. Prior to this, an enormous amount of work had already gone into necessary infrastructure development of Township and County levels, providing access to higher quality care for local communities.
3. Fiji which has generously hosted and supported the Pacific Eye Institute in Suva, with strong support from the New Zealand and Australian Governments, all recognizing the key development role the institute has in training primary and mid-level eye care workers, nurses and technicians, as well as Specialist Ophthalmologists up to Masters level. These personnel come from all across the Pacific Islands States and are trained to the highest level but in an Island setting totally appropriate to where they come from and where they will be working.

These countries should be congratulated for such initiatives and we hope others will see the sense in following their examples where possible and appropriate, preferably in multiples of three.

Good though most of the news is, we still have problems to provide hard evidence for M&E. In this day of evidence-based decision-making, we need to correct this weakness urgently. We do not yet use available new communications technologies. So-called cloud-based interactive websites with facilities to both upload and download data across a network is where we hope some of these limitations can be met.

IAPB membership includes NGOs, academic institutions, private and commercial corporations, all of which are active in most countries of the Region.

Increasingly, we are seeing strong and sustainable public-private partnerships and NGO collaborative Consortia being developed to counteract the problems of the Global Financial constraints. Co-investment leads to increase commitment and co-ownership. They welcome the WHO Action Plan and are anxious to play their part in its implementation.

I ask Member States, particularly those few remaining without National Eye Health Plans to favourably consider such partnership for Sight. In doing so there is a realistic chance of eliminating avoidable blindness, the goal of VISION 2020, before or by 2020.

Thank you again for your support. The fine record of the past 10 years and the current new initiatives give me confidence to expect that this will continue until the job is done.