

**Childhood Blindness/WHA 2009: Prevention of avoidable blindness and visual impairment:
62 World Health Assembly, agenda item, 12.3**

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I am speaking for the IPA, a global organization representing the National Pediatric Associations of most countries and all regions of the world.

We pediatricians congratulate WHO and its international eye partners for bringing this action plan for prevention of avoidable blindness to the attention of the World Health Assembly. Blindness and severe visual impairment are often overlooked as causes of childhood disability, and represent a preventable tragedy for the children who are affected.

Hundreds of thousands of children are blind or severely visually impaired in today's world. Some are blind as a result of congenital or infectious causes such as river blindness or trachoma which are now treatable or preventable conditions. However, the continuing tragedy is that most blind children in the developing world of today suffer because they have not received two proven cost effective primary health care interventions: vitamin A supplementation and measles immunization.

In Sierra Leone, as many as 80% of children in a single school for the blind are estimated to have lost vision for reasons related to vitamin A deficiency. And although rates of measles immunization in the developing world have improved, too many children are still unreached by immunization services. Vitamin A and measles immunization would not only prevent much childhood blindness, they would also offer protection from other major causes of childhood mortality.

Life is often difficult for a blind child in the developing world. Educational and support facilities and vocational opportunities are few. Preventable blindness in adults also impacts the lives of children who may be required to spend their childhoods guiding a blind parent or relative, reduced to the status of "seeing eye children", never free to attend school. Loss of sight in a child or even in a parent thus often results in a child's loss of a chance to develop his or her human potential, a tragic loss indeed.

IPA thanks WHO and its partners for calling needed attention to preventable blindness and visual impairment in children. We pediatricians recognize blindness as a significant and often preventable cause of childhood disability. We will bring this matter to the attention of our global network of pediatricians, seek to collaborate with international partners, and advocate for inclusion of the needs of children in national plans, policies, and programs for eye health and prevention of blindness. And we will continue to fight for the right of every child to basic primary health interventions including measles immunization and vitamin A supplementation.

We thank you for your attention.

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