Global Health

Preventable Vision Loss Affects Millions Globally
More than 1 billion people worldwide had untreated vision loss in 2020, even though 90% of the cases could have been prevented or treated, according to an international commission’s report.

Vision loss is a growing problem as the population ages and less active lifestyles coupled with dietary changes lead to increases in diabetes and diabetic retinopathy. By 2050, the report noted, an estimated 1.8 billion people will have untreated vision loss. Most will live in low- or middle-income countries, with women, ethnic minorities, and those in rural areas disproportionately affected.

“Vision impairment leads to detrimental effects for health, wellbeing, and economic development including reduced education and employment opportunities, social isolation, and shorter life expectancy,” lead author Matthew Burton, PhD, cochair of The Lancet Global Health Commission on Global Eye Health and director of the International Centre for Eye Health at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, said in a statement.

Infectious causes of blindness—onchocerciasis and trachoma—have decreased substantially since the 1990s. But more work is needed to increase access to basic and cost-effective treatments including eyeglasses and cataract surgery. In many parts of the world, out-of-pocket costs are a major barrier to care.

Ophthalmologist and optometrist shortages also pose a problem. In some regions, only 1 optometrist is available per million people compared with 221 per million in high-income countries. The authors urged countries to cover eye care as part of universal health care.

“Universal health coverage is not universal without affordable, high quality, equitable eye care,” they wrote.

Costly Hearing Loss Requires Greater Global Attention
Hearing loss is projected to affect 1 in 4 people globally by 2050, including at least 700 million who will require rehabilitation services, according to the World Health Organization’s first World Report on Hearing.

Throughout life, hearing loss can result from a variety of factors: genetics, low birth weight, infections, head trauma, loud noise exposure, otitis media, and nutritional deficiencies, for example. However, much of it is preventable. In children, immunization, good maternal and neonatal care, as well as screening and management of ear infections can prevent nearly 60% of hearing loss, the report noted.

In adults, noise ordinances, safer listening devices, and screening patients whose medications may harm hearing can protect against hearing loss. Although early identification and appropriate care including medication, surgery, hearing aids, rehabilitative therapy, sign language, and assistive technology or closed captioning services can help, substantial barriers to care exist.

Stigma surrounds hearing loss and hearing aids. In fact, only 17% of people who could benefit from a hearing aid use one, the authors noted. In addition, hearing specialists are in short supply in many low-income countries. For example, 93% have fewer than 1 audiologist per million population, only 17% have more than 1 speech therapist per million, and only half have at least 1 teacher for the deaf per million.

“Untreated hearing loss can have a devastating impact on people’s ability to communicate, to study and to earn a living. It can also impact on people’s mental health and their ability to sustain relationships,” WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, PhD, MSc, said in a statement.

The report urges countries to incorporate hearing care in their national health systems and it notes that every dollar invested in scaling up hearing care will yield a $16 return.

COVID-19 in Clinicians—More Cases in Women, More Deaths in Men
Although a greater proportion of COVID-19 cases occurred in women health care workers and nurses early in the pandemic, more male health care workers and physicians died of the disease, a global analysis reported.

The investigators examined reports of 152,888 infections and 1413 deaths among health care workers in 195 countries that occurred through May 8, 2020. They found that about 1% of health care workers who became infected died. About 70% of infections occurred in women and about 40% were in nurses, but about 70% of deaths occurred in men and about 50% in physicians. Among 14 countries that reported data on health care workers’ specialties, general practitioners and mental health nurses who developed COVID-19 had the highest risk of dying from it. Their deaths may have been due to limited personal protective equipment in these settings, the number of patients seen, or being in particularly close contact with patients, the authors wrote.

Data from a subset of about 14,000 health care workers showed that the largest number of COVID-19 cases and deaths occurred in health care workers aged 50 to 59 years, but the death rate was highest in health care workers older than 70 years.

“High rates of morbidity and mortality in elderly healthcare workers may require assigining them to less risky settings such as telemedicine, non-COVID-19 outpatient clinics or administrative positions,” the authors noted. – Bridget M. Kuehn, MSJ

Note: Source references are available through embedded hyperlinks in the article text online.