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Gender & Blindness

International meeting in Moshi to address gender inequity in blindness

The Kilimanjaro Centre for Community Ophthalmology (KCCO), an institute within the Good Samaritan Foundation and the British Columbia Centre for Epidemiologic & International Ophthalmology (BCEIO, Canada), with support from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, is holding a three day meeting March 11-13, 2010 in Moshi, Tanzania on the topic "Translating our knowledge into action to reduce gender inequity in use of eye care services".

Globally, women account for about two-thirds of all of the people who are blind. This situation is due to a number of factors. First, women tend to have a longer life expectancy than men and vision loss is associated with aging. Second, women have a higher risk of acquiring some common eye conditions (for example, cataract and trachoma) compared to men. However, these conditions are treatable and there is no reason why women should have more blindness due to these diseases. The major reason why women are more likely to have vision loss compared to men is because women have less access to eye care services than men. KCCO has also demonstrated that inequity in access to eye care services is also true for girls. Whether considering boys and girls or women and men, gender inequity is common throughout Africa and Asia. Last year, the global initiative World Sight Day, highlighted the problem of "women and eye care".

Participants at the Moshi meeting will include researchers, directors of key non-governmental organizations, representatives from the World Health Organization, and the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness.

Participants will review strategies that have been successful in reducing gender inequity. Researchers will come from a variety of countries, including Nepal, Tibet, India, Egypt, Tanzania, Kenya, Malawi, and Guatemala. From these presentations the participants will determine the common themes and approaches, map out actions to be taken to implement strategies, stimulate and strengthen alliances (existing researchers, research institutes, governments, and WHO), and explore and develop new international research collaborations in gender, sex and health research.

The KCCO and BCEIO are the global leaders in the area of gender and blindness, first by documenting the magnitude of the problem and then by testing different

strategies to solve the problem. KCCO and BCEIO have also been responsible for preparing key documents for the World Health Organization, the Carter Center, and the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness, including the World Sight Day Report 2009.

In Tanzania KCCO's Herieth Mganga has been working with village women (sentinels) in Hai District and Arumeru District to improve awareness and support for women and girls who need eye care. The number of women coming to the nearby direct referral site (a KCMC/MoH screening site) has increased greatly because of the work by the sentinels.

KCCO's Elizabeth Kishiki and Fortunate Shija, have instituted programmes at the KCMC Hospital Eye Department to improve the number of children returning for post-operative care—they have managed to eliminate the gender inequity in follow up rates. Previous to their work only half of the girls were brought back for follow up while over 70% of boys were brought back. Now, almost 90% of boys and girls get good follow up for spectacles and low vision devices.

The lessons learned in Tanzania are now being adopted in other countries in Africa; KCCO is assisting the MoH and hospitals in Madagascar and Malawi.

More information regarding the meeting and work in Africa can be obtained from the following persons:

- Logistic information can be obtained from Mr. Genes Mng'anya (phone 0784-276168).
- Information on the Tanzania and Africa-wide activities can be obtained from Herieth Mganga (phone 0755-899144), Elizabeth Kishiki (phone 0784-408913) or Fortunate Shija (phone 0784-297151).
- Information on global efforts can be obtained from Dr. Paul Courtright, Co-Director KCCO (phone 0754-971174) or Dr. Ken Bassett, Director, BCEIO (bassett@chspr.ubc.ca).