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MEDIA ADVISORY

First International Conference on Women and Blindness to be held on November 7

**Will Explore Causes and Solutions for High Rate of Blindness
Among Women Worldwide.**

Boston, MA – A call for public health action, increased funding for research, and creative educational programs in both the developing and developed worlds may be an outcome of the first international conference on women and blindness. Vision experts from around the country and the world will gather to explore why women are nearly twice as likely to lose their vision as men and how to stem the tide of blinding diseases in women. Called “Improving Women’s Eye Health: Strategies to Address the Greater Burden of Blindness Among Women” and sponsored by the Women’s Eye Health Task Force based at Schepens Eye Research Institute, the conference will be at the Harvard Club (374 Commonwealth Avenue) on Friday, November 7, from 8 am to 5 pm. Members of the media are invited to attend.

The conference, which will be attended by public health policy makers, health care providers, scientists, organizations for the blind, the women’s health collaborative, and vision experts, is also the first public forum held by the Women’s Eye Health Task Force, founded in 2002 by a group of concerned scientists at Harvard’s Schepens Eye Research Institute in response to a statistic just coming to light –that two-thirds of the world’s blind are women. These Schepens scientists invited and joined forces with vision experts throughout the US to form a national task force to begin a battle against eye disease in women.

The extent of the problem of blindness in women had become clear with the publishing of a meta analysis of more than 70 epidemiological studies on blindness conducted over the past 20 years, which showed that women accounted for most of the world’s blind. In addition, World Health Organization (WHO) statistics indicate that 150 million people are living with low vision and more than 44 million people are blind. Two-thirds of the people suffering from visual impairment are women. Of the one million blind people in the United States, over 700,000 of them are women. In the United States, 2.3 million women are visually impaired out of a total of 3.4 million Americans.

Although there are more older women in developed countries and more younger women in developing countries dealing with vision loss, the overall statistics remain the same. Scientists theorize that longevity, smoking, nutrition, and environmental factors may be causing increased eye disease in women in developed nations, while poverty and lack of access to health services are contributing to the appalling statistic in developing countries.

“The fact is we don’t have all the answers, but what we do know is that living in a developed, industrialized country does not protect a woman from the risk of vision loss,” says Ilene K. Gipson, PhD, a senior scientist at Harvard’s Schepens Eye Research Institute and the chair of the Women’s Eye Health Task Force, who will give welcoming remarks at the conference, along with Wayne Streilein, MD, president of Harvard’s Schepens Eye Research Institute and vice chair of ophthalmology at Harvard Medical School, and Joan W. Miller, MD, chief of ophthalmology at Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary and chair of ophthalmology at Harvard Medical School.

Gipson continues: “We hope this conference will be the first step in grappling with the reality of this problem and laying out some strategies to address it. There has been greater recognition of the issue and more resources focused on blindness and women in developing countries (although still not enough) than in the West.”

Conference Highlights

In the keynote speech, “Translating Research into Public Health Action,” Hugh R. Taylor, MD, the managing director for the Centre for Eye Research at the University of Melbourne in Australia will describe the impact of low vision on the individual and society, the barriers to preventive care and various successful public health initiatives he created in Australia. “We are looking to Dr. Taylor’s efforts as model strategies to help us in our fight against blindness in women,” says Gipson.

In “Gender and Blindness” Paul Courtright, DrPH -- a lead investigator of the meta-analysis, an epidemiologist at the University of British Columbia and the leader of a gender-oriented outreach program at the Kilimanjaro Centre for Community Ophthalmology in Moshi, Tanzania -- will focus on women and blindness in the third world. He will describe the results of his studies that suggest that attitudes and beliefs held by men in these societies are contributing to blindness in women. Men in some cultures, he has found, believe that medical care for their wives is not as important as it is for themselves as heads of households. He will describe creative educational programs that target men to convince them that visually healthy wives can be more productive family members.

“Major Concerns in Women’s Health,” will be the topic of a presentation by Julie E. Buring, DSC, a professor of ambulatory care and prevention at Harvard

Medical School and the principal investigator of the Women's Health Study at Brigham and Women's Hospital. She will talk about vision health issues in the context of all the major health concerns facing women. For instance, she will point out that lung cancer has overtaken breast cancer as the leading cause of cancer death in women, and that heart disease is the leading cause of death in women as well as men. She will also describe the risk factors for diseases such as diabetes and heart disease, which are the same risk factors for eye disease--poor dietary habits, smoking and other lifestyle issues.

In "Sex Steroid Hormones and Eye Disease," Debra A. Schaumberg, ScD, OD, MPH, an assistant professor of Medicine in the Division of Preventive Medicine at Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School, will describe her landmark studies that indicate a strong relationship between the use of hormone replacement therapy and dry eye syndrome, a painful debilitating eye disease affecting millions worldwide, mostly women.

"Nutritional Factors and Eye Disease" by Richard D. Semba, MD, an associate professor of Ophthalmology, Molecular Microbiology and Immunology, and International Health at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine and The Wilmer Ophthalmological Institute in Baltimore, will explore what nutritional factors that are known to have an impact on vision and the nutrition prevention measures women can take to increase their eye health. For example, carotenoids and antioxidant vitamins appear to protect people from getting cataracts and age-related macular degeneration. And maintaining a healthy weight can prevent type 2 diabetes, with its disastrous consequences for the eye.

"Autoimmunity in Eye Diseases" will be the focus of a presentation by Janine A. Smith, MD, deputy clinical director of the National Eye Institute. Smith will discuss the higher incidence of autoimmune diseases in women and the ocular, potentially blinding features of these conditions. She will also describe her research on an autoimmune disease called premature ovarian failure, which affects women under the age of 40. The ovarian failure leads to decreased estrogen, dry eye and even osteoporosis.

Following each presentation, a panel of experts will discuss the issues raised with the presenter and the audience.

To obtain a conference agenda, contact Patti Jacobs at pattijacobs@hotmail.com.

The Women's Eye Health Task Force is based at Schepens Eye Research Institute, which is an affiliate of Harvard Medical School and the largest independent eye research institute in the nation.

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