

WEHTF **Facts** 2007

A History of the Women's Eye Health Task Force

The idea of a task force to look at issues of gender and blindness was first proposed during a meeting of the public relations committee of the SERI board of directors. It was the year 2001, and Rick Kleckner suggested a women's eye health initiative be formed to address gender and blindness issues important to the ophthalmic community and, therefore, to The Schepens Eye Research Institute (SERI).

After lengthy discussion, the committee agreed and the (late) President, J. Wayne Streilein asked Dr. Ilene Gipson, Professor of Ophthalmology, Harvard Medical School and Ocular Surface Scholar, Senior Scientist at SERI to lead the effort to bring together the professional community to consider gender and blindness.

The second source of inspiration was derived from the selection of a highly motivated Executive Committee. The members of the executive committee were, and are, Ilene K. Gipson, PhD, Chair; Alice J. Adler, PhD, Senior Scientist at SERI and Associate Professor of Ophthalmology, Harvard Medical School; Debra A. Schaumberg, ScD, OD, MPH, Assistant Professor of Medicine and Assistant Professor of Ophthalmology, Division of Preventive Medicine, Harvard Medical School and Brigham & Women's Hospital, and Gale E. Unger, Administrative Assistant to Dr. Gipson at SERI. They were soon joined by Dr. Janine Smith, National Eye Institute; Alice R. Dietrich, a Trustee of The Schepens and Patti Jacobs from the SERI Development Office.

In the meantime, a meta-analysis of 70 causes and prevalence of blindness studies was published, indicating that, of all those who are blind, worldwide, two-thirds of them are women. This brought to bear the third and final source of encouragement

needed to galvanize the task force, and a national advisory board was created in 2002 consisting of outstanding clinicians and researchers specializing in many aspects of women's health and eye care. In September 2004, Virginia M. Turner, DrPH, joined WEHTF as Program Coordinator.

Accomplishments to Date

Since its founding in November 2002, the WEHTF has developed an extensive collaborative network of professional health and medical colleagues, created a website, prepared print materials for distribution within the Lions Clubs International Foundation/Lions Eye Health Program (LCIF/LEHP); and, undertaken a program of public outreach education and alerted the media to our cause.

Professional seminars, conferences, networks and partnerships

"Improving Women's Eye Health"

The First International Symposium on Women's Eye Health was held on November 7, 2003 entitled *"Improving Women's Eye Health: Strategies to address the greater burden of blindness among women."*

ARVO Symposium

Dr. Penny Asbell, Professor of Ophthalmology at Mt. Sinai Medical Center and WEHTF Advisory Board member organized a mini-symposium, *"Sex-based Biology in Ocular Disease and Treatment,"* at the annual Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology (ARVO) meeting in Fort Lauderdale, FL, April 2004.

Exhibition Booth – ARVO 2004 and 2005:

An educational booth was set up to attract attention, distribute materials and share information.

ICER Symposium

Dr. David Sullivan, a member of WEHTF Advisory Board, organized a symposium, *"Sex Differences in Ocular Cell Biology,"* as part of the biennial 2004 ICER (International Congress of Eye Research) meeting.


20 Staniford Street
Boston, MA 02114
1-877-724-3736
www.womenseyehealth.org

Editorials and Interviews

- *Are women more likely to be blind or visually impaired than men?*, Gipson I and Turner V. ARCH SOC ESP OFTALMOL 2005; 80:323-326 (Spanish Ophthalmology Journal).
- *Women's Eye Health Task Force Forms in Response to Prevalence of Blindness and Visual Impairment in Women*. Gipson I. ARVO Newsletter.
- Women in Ophthalmology (WIO) e-newsletter

Networks & Partners

- Lions Clubs International Foundation
- The Schepens Eye Research Institute
- The Department of Ophthalmology at Harvard Medical School. The Center of Excellence in Women's Health at Harvard Medical School (COE/HMS).
- *Healthy Vision* 2010 (NEI/NIH)

Public Information Campaign

Newspapers and other print media as well as press releases have been issued and widely circulated through the print media such as: the *Boston Globe*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and other dailies around the country; the *National Women's Health Report* (the Associated Press distributed a condensed version broadcast by about thirty radio stations.); the *Providence Journal*, *Eurotimes*, *Women's e-news*, and *Optics & Photonics News*, *Ocular Surgery News*, *The Palm Beach Post*.

Public Service Announcements (PSAs)

Two public service announcements were sent to approximately 100 radio stations in the New England area in the spring of 2003. These 60-second spots were entitled "*WomenProtect your vision*" and "*WomenProtect vision of family members.*"

Radio Media Tour

Radio Media Tour for Mothers Day 2005
Six hundred stations with 12 million listeners picked up the RMT.

Public Seminars

Members of the WEHTF Executive Committee spoke to lay audiences during several seminars

at different venues; the Lions at their district conventions sponsored two talks in Massachusetts; three seminars in Florida and one in New York City were sponsored by The Schepens Eye Research Institute (SERI). "Old Fashioned Tea Party": Drs. Gipson and Turner were guest speakers at Lions District 33Y fundraiser for a mobile eye unit for Western Massachusetts in April 2005.

WEHTF Print and Website

WEHTF has developed both print and web materials for outreach education and advocacy work with members of the public and health professionals. These materials are available on the WEHTF website:

<http://www.womenseyehealth.org>

Brochures

- "Eye Care Checklist"
- "Your Child's Eye Health Checklist"
- "Is your eyesight going up in smoke?"
- Information on WEHTF
- "Do What's Right To Protect Your Sight"

Posters

- "Enjoy the world with healthy eyes"
- "Is your eyesight going up in smoke?"

Summary

The Women's Eye Health Task Force (WEHTF) was formed to actively address the need for better understanding of gender and blindness issues. The WEHTF is based at The Schepens Eye Research Institute (SERI) in Boston, Massachusetts, USA. The WEHTF is committed to reducing the burden of blindness and visual impairment through advocacy for women's eye health issues; supporting public education concerning prevention and treatment of eye disease; building awareness within professional organizations of women's eye health issues; and ensuring that eye research priorities reflect the importance of women's eye health.

Two out of three people who are blind or visually impaired are women.