

A Path to Clear Vision and a Healthier Society

by Francesca Sefton

In America today, heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and stroke are among the leading causes of death, and all pose significant threats to vision. Optometrists play a vital role in general health and disease prevention, as many diseases may be initially detected in the eye. According to an article recently published in the Los Angeles Times, “The states showing the worst trends have high rates of poverty ... they also historically have had among the weakest healthcare systems, with high rates of people lacking insurance and poor access to medical care.”¹ In children, vision disorders are the most common debilitating handicap, yet studies show that only a small percentage of children have comprehensive eye exams before the age of six.² The primary barriers to accessing eye care are not only lack of awareness of the optometrist’s role in evaluating overall health, but more significantly, cost. With mortality rates and visual disabilities increasing, primary care optometrists must ensure that quality eye care is provided to patients of all ages regardless of socioeconomic background, as eye care is essential for clear vision, general health, and quality of life. My goal is to enlighten the public on the importance of regular eye exams and to eliminate these barriers by partnering with companies like National Vision that offer affordable eye care for those in need.

Having volunteered in India, Panama, and Belize to provide free eye care, I have seen firsthand the prevalence of treatable ocular conditions in poverty-stricken communities and their impact on quality of life. In our developed nation, the financial barrier similarly prevents many from receiving routine eye examinations, corrective eyewear, and medical treatment. Many Americans remain uninsured, and high cost of frames and lenses is another obstacle to clear vision. As an optometrist, I can help make eye care more accessible for a healthier society through National Vision sponsored organizations, community efforts, and public awareness campaigns, serving locally and globally while carrying out my passion for optometry.

Amblyopia, the leading cause of monocular vision loss, can easily be prevented with timely detection in children. By providing free vision screenings and eye wear for children through community outreach programs such as Prevent Blindness America, we can help reduce one of the most unnecessary causes of vision loss. Serving our economically challenged communities increases public health awareness on the importance of lifelong eye care, directly removes the barrier to access by providing free examinations and correction, and stimulates profitability in the eye care industry in the long term.

It is commendable that companies like National Vision are seeking to remove the financial barrier that prevents so many Americans from receiving proper eye care. Routine, quality eye care is paramount for longevity and quality of life. I hope to be a part of the initiative that National Vision is seeking to foster: to help people see their best to live their best, by making eye care and eye wear more affordable and accessible.

¹ Levey, Noam N. “Researchers find causes for higher death rates among middle-aged whites.” *Los Angeles Times* 29 Jan. 2016: Web. 29 Jan 2016.

² “Pediatric Eye and Vision Examination.” *Optometric Clinical Practice Guideline*. St. Louis: AOA Board of Trustees, 2002. *AOA.org* Web. 28 Jan. 2016.