

## Our vision of vision health: the National Coalition for Vision Health

Can J Ophthalmol 2007;42:790–1  
doi:10.3129/i07-177

Are you aware that Canada's population is aging? This process will start to accelerate in 2011, when the first baby boomers (born in 1946–1965) turn 65 years old. By 2031, approximately 24% of the population will be over the age of 65.<sup>1</sup> The vision health care workforce will not be able to keep pace with the demand for its services. The ratio of ophthalmologists to patients over 65 alone is projected to rise from 1:4301 to 1:7576 in the next 14 years.<sup>2</sup> Canada is headed for a potential epidemic of age-related eye disease. Avoidable vision loss will increase dramatically.

Vision loss is a serious and costly health issue that will result in enormous personal suffering and tremendous economic impact unless we intervene. The annual direct and indirect vision health costs in Canada are estimated at \$8 billion, ballooning to over \$15 billion if one includes the loss of well-being. Vision loss is the most feared disability, according to an Environics poll.<sup>3</sup> Vision loss ranks with cancer as one of the two most feared health conditions. The consequences of vision impairment prevent healthy and independent aging; social dependence increases, the risk of falls and the mortality rate double, the risk of depression triples, and the risk of hip fractures quadruples.

The National Coalition for Vision Health (NCVH) believes that developing and implementing a Vision Plan for Canada—a plan of action to promote vision health and prevent avoidable blindness in Canada—is the key to averting this vision loss crisis.

What is NCVH? It is an organization of associations that share a common interest in eye care and vision research. The Coalition provides national leadership on Canada's vision health issues and in the development of related public policy. NCVH accomplishes its goals through the mandates of its member associations by consultation, collaboration, advocacy, research, education, and service. The Coalition believes that all Canadians are entitled to full and equal access to eye care. Members include the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (Institutes of Neurosciences, Mental Health, and Addiction), Canadian National Institute for the Blind, Canadian Ophthalmological Society, Foundation Fighting Blindness—Canada, Canadian Association of Optometrists, Opticians Association of Canada, Vision Health Research Council of Canada, and a participant observer from the Centre for Chronic Disease Prevention and Control (CCDPC), and Public Health Agency of Canada.

In looking to achieve its mandate, NCVH hosted a 1.5-day workshop in Toronto this past February to develop a national plan of action for the promotion of vision health and the prevention of avoidable blindness in Canada.

Invited participants included academics, clinicians, researchers, nongovernment organizations, and representatives from the federal and provincial governments, as well as international guests from Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

The keynote speaker was Professor Hugh R. Taylor, Managing Director of the Centre for Eye Research Australia, speaking on *Developing a National Eye Health Plan for Australia—Lessons Learned*.<sup>4</sup>

NCVH, with funding from the Public Health Agency of Canada, commissioned a comprehensive, evidence-based background document from Drs. Buhrmann and Hodge, clinician/epidemiologists at the University of Ottawa (Ottawa, Ont.), which would focus on information relevant to building a framework for action for vision health. Drs. Buhrmann and Hodge produced *Foundations for a Canadian Vision Health Strategy*.<sup>2</sup> This document, together with *Synthesis of Responses to a Pre-workshop Consultation*,<sup>5</sup> a document that drew freely from the Australian Vision Plan Framework and had been previously reviewed by members of the vision community, was used to kick-start the discussions. These documents can be found on the NCVH Web site (<http://www.visionhealth.ca>).

Workshop participants were unanimous in their support for the concept of a National Vision Plan. Participants agreed that the plan should be comprehensive, cohesive, coordinated, and inclusive, containing action areas that would have the potential to lead to the prevention of avoidable blindness. Components of such a plan would include (i) reducing the risk of eye disease and eye injury through health promotion and increased public awareness; (ii) increasing early detection of disease through public and professional education and the development of early detection protocols; (iii) improving access to eye health and rehabilitation services; (iv) promoting excellence in vision health outcomes; and (v) expanding and improving the knowledge base through research, surveillance, and knowledge translation. The recommendations of the workshop participants are contained in the *Workshop Report*.<sup>6</sup>

NCVH is asking the federal government to endorse the creation of a Vision Plan for Canada and allocate dedicated human resources and financial assistance to a Vision Program with its own Secretariat. All federal government vision initiatives could then be centralized within the Vision Program. The Secretariat would work with NCVH and vision stakeholders to help develop the Vision Plan for Canada and to obtain the input and support of the provinces and territories, a necessary step if such a plan is to be implemented.

In recent months, members of NCVH have met with Mr. Steven Fletcher, Parliamentary Secretary for Health; policy advisors of the Office of the Minister of Health and Mr. Ian Clark, Departmental Assistant, Office of the Minister of Health; Mr. Tim Hutchinson, Director, CCDPC, Public Health Agency of Canada; and Ms. Kim Elmslie and Ms. Barbara Foster, who are also of CCDPC.

We are now scheduling meetings with members of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health and with the Expert Group Panel, CCDPC, to raise the profile of vision in Canada and to enlist their support in moving our agenda forward. The responses to date have been positive.

Why is it that politicians seem oblivious to the fact that patients prize vision and fear vision loss? A vision plan for Canada is a nonpartisan issue with the potential to improve the quality of the lives of all Canadians. The success of our initiative will ultimately be determined by the prevailing political will. We can influence political will by raising the profile of vision in Canada; by educating politicians, both federal and provincial, about the looming vision crisis in Canada; and by asking what can be done to promote vision health and prevent avoidable blindness.

*Calvin W. Breslin, BSc, MD, FRCSC*  
 Chair, National Coalition for Vision Health  
 University of Toronto, Toronto, Ont.  
 cbreslin@sympatico.ca

## REFERENCES

1. The Daily; December 15, 2005. *Population projections, 2005 to 2031*. Statistics Canada. Available at: <http://www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/051215/d051215.pdf>. Accessed September 20, 2007.
2. Buhrmann R, Hodge W, Beardmore, MA. *Foundations for a Canadian vision health strategy: towards preventing avoidable blindness and promoting vision health*. The National Coalition for Vision Health. Available at: <http://www.visionhealth.ca>.
3. Armstrong, J. *Enviro-nics poll: public awareness and attitudes about age-related macular degeneration*. Presented at The Cost of Blindness: What It Means to Canadians symposium. Toronto, Ont.; January 31 to February 1, 2004. Available at: <http://www.costofblindness.org/>. Accessed September 20, 2007.
4. Taylor, H. *Clear insight: the economic impact and cost of vision loss to Australia*. 2004. Centre for Eye Research Australia. Available at: <http://www.cera.org.au/publications/>. Accessed February 15, 2006.
5. Breslin C, Muller C, Steinbach M, Finkle D. *Synthesis of responses to a pre-workshop consultation*. The National Coalition for Vision Health. Available at: <http://www.visionhealth.ca>.
6. Strachan D, Finkle D. *Workshop report*. The National Coalition for Vision Health. Available at: <http://www.visionhealth.ca>.