

*IN RECENT DECADES, MEDICAL ADVANCES HAVE KEPT PACE WITH ALL THESE INTERNATIONAL MOVES, AND HAVE HELPED TO REDUCE THE INCIDENCE OF BLINDNESS DUE TO INFECTIOUS DISEASES. AT THE SAME TIME, MODERN MEDICAL PRACTICE HAS HELPED TO EXTEND THE HUMAN LIFE SPAN. THUS PERSONS AFFLICTED WITH INADEQUATELY TREATED DIABETES OR CHRONIC VASCULAR DISEASE LIVE LONGER BUT MAY NOT AVOID THE SERIOUS EYE COMPLICATIONS OF THESE DISEASES, MANY MORE PEOPLE NOW LIVE TO AN ADVANCED AGE, WHEN GLAUCOMA AND CATARACT ARE MORE LIKELY TO DEVELOP.*

A resolution approved at the Twenty-eighth World Health Assembly in Geneva in May 1975 encouraged member countries "to develop national programmes for the prevention of blindness especially aimed at the control of trachoma, xerophthalmia (dryness of the conjunctiva and cornea due to Vitamin A deficiency), onchocerciasis and other causes and to introduce adequate measures for the early detection and treatment of other potentially blinding conditions such as cataract and glaucoma". (Cataract is an opacity of the crystalline lens of the eye, and glaucoma is the name for a group of eye diseases which may lead to blindness through an increase in the intra-ocular pressure.)

The International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness came into existence in January 1975 as an independent, nongovernmental organization to lead a world movement "for the prevention and cure of blindness and to preserve sight". Its parent bodies were the International Association for the Prevention of Blindness (which took the initiative in constituting the new Agency), the International Federation of Ophthalmic Societies, and World Council for the Welfare of the Blind.

In recent decades, medical advances have kept pace with all these international moves, and have helped to reduce the incidence of blindness due to infectious diseases. At the same time, modern medical practice has helped to extend the human life span. Thus persons afflicted with inadequately treated diabetes or chronic vascular disease live longer but may not avoid the serious eye complications of these diseases. Many more people now live to an advanced age, when glaucoma and cataract are more likely to develop.

The introduction of a new technique to save life has even been known to prove disastrous to eyes. Excessive oxygen in incubators produced gross maldevelopment of the retina, retrolental fibroplasia, blinding thousands of premature babies between 1940 and 1954, when the cause was at last established.

New technologies have also left in their wake a sad tally of accidental blindness in the engineering and chemical industries, as a result of accidents in the home or on the land, or as part of the heavy traffic toll on the roads.

On the credit side, most countries now have some form of special pension rights or disablement grants for the blind, and well-organized institutions which help them to find employment.

But despite all the social advances that have been so laboriously made over the centuries, there are blind people today who feel that integration is a myth, and that society still considers it more proper to offer the charity which 4000 years of giving has made a compulsive gesture than to accord recognition of a blind person's capability for first-class citizenship. Even as late as 1949 in the United Kingdom, 7% of the public were inclined to regard blindness as a punishment for sin, while 22% of the blind themselves felt, or had at some time felt, that it was a punishment.

Such deep-seated habits of thinking die hard, and it is clear that further efforts will still be required long into the foreseeable future before the role that the blind can play in the world is universally taken for granted both by society and by blind people themselves. □□