

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A survey of visual impairment and blindness in children attending seven schools for the blind in Myanmar

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: To determine the causes of visual impairment and blindness amongst children in schools for the blind in Myanmar; to identify the avoidable causes of visual impairment and blindness; and to provide spectacles, low vision aids, orientation and mobility training and ophthalmic treatment where indicated.

Methods: Two hundred and eight children under 16 years of age from all 7 schools for the blind in Myanmar were examined and the data entered into the World Health Organization Prevention of Blindness Examination Record for Childhood Blindness (WHO/PBL ERCB).

Results: One hundred and ninety nine children (95.7%) were blind (BL = Visual Acuity [VA] < 3/60 in the better eye) and 3 had severe visual impairment (SVI = VA < 6/60 to 3/60 in the better eye). Most children had corneal abnormalities as the major anatomical site of SVI/BL (100, 49.5%), however the cause of SVI/BL was unknown in the majority (88, 43.6%). Measles keratitis was the commonest identifiable cause (17.4%) and 88 children had avoidable causes of SVI/BL (43.6%). Nearly 16% of children required an optical device and 24.2% required medical attention, with a potential for visual improvement through intervention in 15.8%.

Conclusion: Nearly half of the children in schools for the blind in Myanmar had potentially avoidable causes of SVI/BL. With measles being both the commonest identifiable and commonest avoidable cause, the data supports the need for a measles immunization campaign. There is also a need for a dedicated pediatric eye care center with regular ophthalmology visits to the schools, and improved optometric, low vision and orientation and mobility services in Myanmar.

KEYWORDS: Children; Blindness; Myanmar; Survey

INTRODUCTION

Myanmar is located in Southeast Asia and has a population of nearly 55 million. The Meiktila Eye

Received 17 November 2008; revised 29 June 2009;
accepted 16 July 2009

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Study reported a blindness prevalence of 8.1% in adults aged 40 years and over,¹ however there are no data on the prevalence and causes of visual impairment and blindness in children in Myanmar. Results of population-based studies indicate a lower prevalence in children, with up to 1.5 per 1,000 blind in the very poor communities of the world.² The prevalence of visual impairment and blindness varies from region to region, with the highest prevalence seen in Africa and Asia.² The causes also vary,