

## **Childhood Blindness Prevention (CBP) Program of DCI:**

The World Health Organization estimates that there are nearly 45 million blind people worldwide. An estimated 500,000 children become blind each year. When children are blind it affects their opportunities for education, employment, and earning. Blindness that starts early in life adversely impacts psychomotor, social, and emotional development. Blind children have a higher death rate than their sighted counterparts, and in developing countries up to 60% are thought to die within a year of becoming blind. The good news is that over 80% of blindness in children-- particularly those in the poorest communities--is due to causes that could be prevented by very simple, cost-effective interventions. Blindness in childhood is a priority of Vision 2020, a global initiative for the elimination of avoidable blindness ([www.v2020.org](http://www.v2020.org)).

In Bangladesh alone nearly two million people suffer from blindness, and another three million are visually impaired. But without medical intervention this figure could double over the next twenty years. Today the economic burden and loss in productivity due to blindness in Bangladesh amounts to nearly a billion dollars per year. The main cause of blindness in Bangladesh is cataracts, which are responsible for 60% of the cases. Glaucoma and Vitamin A deficiency are also major contributors to vision impairment and blindness. Even though cataracts can be easily cured by a simple operation, most of the Bangladeshi population has no access to cataract treatment services. There are very few organizations working in this field. And government spending is woefully inadequate: the per capita health care expenditure (in all areas, let alone for blindness prevention) of the government is only 47 cents. If action is not taken urgently, countless people in Bangladesh will be destined to remain blind for life.

With the aim of reaching out to those most vulnerable to blindness, children and infants, DCI has initiated a Childhood Blindness Prevention Program. The program was officially inaugurated in Bangladesh by DCI President Dr. Brian DeBroff in December of 2007 (see below).

### **The goals of the CBP program are very basic:**

- To provide community awareness and education on eye health, such as nutritional guidance and information on the symptoms associated with eye diseases.
- To offer free diagnosis and treatment of eye diseases for poor children; and, once the problem is identified, to provide for a free examination by an ophthalmologist and surgery if required – with DCI making the necessary arrangements free of cost to the patient.
- Our ultimate goal is to create mobile eye clinics so that we can provide eye care (with latest cataract screening and treatment facilities) to children and infants in rural areas, where presently the need is greatest. DCI also plans to conduct research on methods for the prevention and treatment of congenital and developmental cataracts, including pediatric IOL (Intra Ocular Lens) implant technologies.

**The roots of the program go back to 2006**, when we began to provide primary eye care to all the children in our Sun Child Sponsorship Project areas: Feni, Nilphamary and Patuakhali. At that time we started screening children in these villages for visual problems. Since thousands of children in Bangladesh suffer from vision impairment due to Vitamin A deficiency, DCI distributes Vitamin A supplements to all of the children in its project areas. In 2006 DCI gave vegetable seeds to 513 families in local villages, which enabled them to plant gardens and grow the vegetables necessary to meet their nutritional needs. We also provided eyeglasses to 54 school children and successfully carried out six cataract operations at the Dhaka National Eye Hospital and Ispahani Eye Hospital.

**At a ceremony in Dhaka, Bangladesh on December 15, 2007**, Dr. Brian DeBroff and Professor Azad Khan, President of the Diabetic Association of Bangladesh and Country Director of DCI, inaugurated DCI's Childhood Blindness Prevention Program. To mark the official launch of the program DCI

sponsored a seven-day eye surgery seminar/workshop, from December 11 through December 17. Using facilities generously donated by the Diabetic Association of Bangladesh and Islamia Eye Hospital, Dr. DeBroff led hands-on training sessions where local eye surgeons learned a pediatric surgical technique that he helped to develop: Posterior Capsulorrhexis with Double Optic Capture. One advantage of this procedure is that most pediatric ophthalmologists, and even general ophthalmologists, could easily be trained to perform it, which would represent a major advance towards eliminating childhood blindness caused by congenital cataracts.

Over one hundred Bangladeshi eye surgeons participated in this week-long seminar/workshop, which was co-sponsored by the Bangladesh Ophthalmological Society (BOS). As part of the workshop, Dr. DeBroff performed surgery on several children at risk of blindness from cataracts.

In collaboration with the Diabetic Association of Bangladesh (DAB), Ophthalmological Society of Bangladesh (OSB), Ispahani Eye Hospital, Terre-Des-Hommes Eye Hospital, Harun Eye Foundation and other organizations, DCI will now seek to help as many needy children and infants as possible by extending our CBP Program throughout the country.



Dr. DeBroff (second from right) inaugurates the Childhood Blindness Prevention Program



Dr. DeBroff performing cataract surgery in Bangladesh



Vision test by trained field officer



Dr. DeBroff and Dr. Hoque with children suffering from eye diseases who are under DCI's care