

Is current eye-care-policy focus almost exclusively on cataract adequate to deal with blindness in India.

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Is current eye-care-policy focus almost exclusively on cataract adequate to deal with blindness in India?

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Summary

Background

India's National Programme for Control of Blindness focuses almost exclusively on cataract, based on a national survey done in the 1980s which reported that cataract caused 80% of the blindness in India. No current population-based data on the causes of blindness in India are available. We assessed the rate and causes of blindness in an urban population in southern India.

Methods

We selected 2954 participants by stratified, random, cluster, systematic sampling from Hyderabad city. Eligible participants were interviewed and given a detailed ocular

assessment, including visual acuity, refraction, slitlamp biomicroscopy, applanation intraocular pressure, gonioscopy, dilatation, grading of cataract, stereoscopic fundus assessment, and automated-threshold visual fields.

Findings

2522 participants, including 1399 aged 30 years or more, were assessed. 49 participants (all aged ≥ 30 years) were blind (presenting distance visual acuity $< 6/60$ or central visual field $< 20^\circ$ in the better eye). The rate of blindness among those aged 30 years or more, adjusted for age and sex, was $3 \cdot 08\%$ ([95% CI $1 \cdot 95$ – $4 \cdot 21$]). Causes included cataract ($29 \cdot 7\%$), retinal disease ($17 \cdot 1\%$), corneal disease ($15 \cdot 4\%$), refractive error ($12 \cdot 5\%$), glaucoma ($12 \cdot 1\%$), and optic atrophy ($11 \cdot 0\%$). $15 \cdot 7\%$ of the blindness caused by visual-field constriction would have been missed without visual-field examination. Also without visual-field and detailed dilated-fundus assessments, blindness attributed to cataract would have been overestimated by up to $75 \cdot 8\%$. If the use of cataract surgery in this urban population was half that found in this study, which simulates the situation in rural India, cataract would have caused $51 \cdot 8\%$ ($39 \cdot 4$ – $64 \cdot 2$) of blindness, significantly less than the 80% accepted by current policy.

Interpretation

Much of the blindness in this Indian population was due to non-cataract causes. The previous national survey did not include detailed dilated-fundus assessment and visual-field examination which could have led to overestimation of cataract as a cause of blindness in India. Policy-makers in India should encourage well-designed population-based epidemiological studies from which to develop a comprehensive long-term policy on blindness in addition to dealing with cataract.



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