Management of cataract in primary health care services

Second edition

World Health Organization
Geneva

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1996

First edition, 1990
Second edition, 1996

WHO Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Management of cataract in primary health care services. — 2nd ed.

1.Cataract 2.Cataract extraction 3.Primary health care – organization and administration

ISBN 92 4 154499 6 (NLM Classification: WW 260)

TYPESET IN HONG KONG
PRINTED IN ENGLAND

95/10708—Best-set/Clays/TWC—6000

The World Health Organization was established in 1948 as a specialized agency of the United Nations serving as the directing and coordinating authority for international health matters and public health. One of WHO's constitutional functions is to provide objective and reliable information and advice in the field of human health, a responsibility that it fulfils in part through its extensive programme of publications.

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Preface

Cataract, generally defined as an opacity of the crystalline lens of the eye, is a major cause of visual impairment and blindness worldwide. This disorder, which has been documented since very early times, was recognized by the Twenty-eighth World Health Assembly in 1975[1] as one of the most important causes of avoidable blindness.

Cataract accounts for nearly half of all blindness, and is particularly common in developing countries. The grim fact is that there already exists a formidable total of some 15.8 million people needlessly blind from cataract. With the rapid "greying" of the population, the problem of blindness from cataract will assume even more staggering proportions in the future.

In the present state of knowledge, there is no proven means of preventing cataract or its progression to blindness. The condition is, however, amenable to surgical treatment, which, together with the optical correction of the ensuing refractive deficit, results in the restoration of vision.

In developed countries, the availability of eye care services to those blind from cataract ensures that the large majority have their sight restored. In contrast, in the developing countries, in which the majority of the cataract blind are found, there has been over the years an accumulation of unattended persons blind from cataract, resulting in what is commonly referred to as the "cataract backlog".

It has therefore become imperative that programmes for the control of blindness should include, as an important component, interventions for the surgical restoration of vision in persons blind from cataract. These should be an integral part of the primary health care system, so that most of the people who now make up the "cataract backlog" will have better access to surgical services.

Since the publication of the first edition of this manual, newer techniques of cataract surgery, such as extracapsular lens extraction

[1] Resolution WHA28.54.

with intraocular lens implantation, have become more common in developing countries, particularly in urban settings. The advantages and disadvantages of the use of newer technologies in developing countries are discussed in the report of a WHO meeting on the subject.[1] Some of the conclusions reached during the meeting have been incorporated into the text of this edition. Although much of the original version remains entirely valid and relevant, and is therefore unchanged, the Annex describing the intracapsular technique of cataract surgery has been omitted. This information can be found elsewhere.[2]

This publication contains comprehensive guidelines on the management of cataract through primary health care. It includes a review of the available information on the prevalence of blindness resulting from cataract, strategies for action against cataract, guidelines for the planning of interventions, including development of human resources and infrastructure, as well as managerial requirements for effective action.

The basic guidelines outlined in this publication, which are intended for adaptation to suit local conditions, will help to ensure intensified action against cataract and the restoration of vision to those already blind or destined to become blind from cataract in the future.

The problem of needless blindness from cataract continues to be a priority issue in the struggle for the prevention of blindness and will be so until eye care providers are able to meet the need of an ageing population for increasing cataract services. Such an increase can be achieved mainly through strengthened surgical services that provide high-volume and high-quality surgery at a cost communities can afford. Management of cataract through the primary health care system is a viable strategy that has proved to be successful.

* * *

The colour photographs were kindly supplied by Dr Jock Anderson, Dr Allen Foster, Professor Gordon Johnson, Dr Murray McGavin, and Dr David Yorston.

[1] The use of intraocular lenses in cataract surgery in developing countries. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 1991, 69:657–666.

[2] Cook J, Sankaran B, Wasunna AEO, eds. *General surgery at the district hospital*. Geneva, World Health Organization, 1988.

Contents

1. Clinical aspects

Definition

The term "cataract" is derived from the Latin word *cataracta*, which is in turn derived from the Greek word *kataraktes*, which means waterfall (breakdown, downrushing). Ancient practitioners probably gave this name to the condition in the belief that the liquid content of the eye was cascading down.

Defined strictly on the basis of the pathomorphological process involved, cataract is an opacification or loss of transparency in the crystalline lens of the eye. From a public health perspective, however, attention also needs to be paid to the consequences of such an opacification in terms of visual acuity.

In a large number of instances, the opacity, by virtue of its size or position, does not affect vision. In many cases, the opacity is not progressive and mere identification of such an opacity during mass eye examination surveys or clinical examination does not necessarily portend progression to blindness in the future. These considerations sometimes confound the data on cataract diagnosed during eye examinations in blindness surveys, in respect both of the actual prevalence of cataract and of the annual incidence of new cases requiring surgery. An accurate estimation of both rates is essential for determining the magnitude of the existing problem, as well as for predicting how it is likely to develop in the medium and long term. Such a prediction would make it easier to plan interventions against cataract as part of national programmes for the prevention of blindness.

Types of cataract

Cataract can be classified by age of onset (e.g. congenital, juvenile, or "senile" cataract) or by location of the opacity within the lens (e.g. cortical or nuclear). In addition, cataract may be designated as being the result of, or secondary to, other ocular diseases, systemic disorders, and genetic or environmental influences.

The type of cataract and consequent blindness that gives rise to public health problems is generally related to ageing ("senile" cataract). However, congenital cataract and cataracts resulting from trauma, among other things, pose special problems in management with regard to both prevention and treatment. While prevention is part of primary eye care, management of such cataracts is generally the responsibility of institutions that can provide the necessary sophisticated instrumentation often required for treatment and follow up, and will not be described here.

Cataracts can also be classified in relation to their stage of maturity, i.e. as incipient, immature, mature, or hypermature. An incipient cataract is a lens opacity that interferes with vision, if at all, to a very small extent and produces only a slight localized or generalized reduction of the red reflex. An immature cataract is a further stage of lens opacification that may reduce vision to little better than the perception of hand movements at close range and in which there is a marked generalized reduction of the red reflex. A mature cataract is defined as a totally opaque lens that reduces the visual acuity to the perception of hand movements at close range, or less, and in which there is a total absence of the red reflex. Swelling of the lens may occur when a cataract has reached an advanced stage (intumescent cataract). Finally, the term *hypermature cataract* is applied to a cataractous lens that has shrunk, often with a wrinkling of the capsule. Vision is generally restricted to the perception of hand movements at close range, or less, and the red reflex is absent.

The above classification is important from a public health point of view, not only in eye examination surveys but also because of the deleterious effect that delay in surgery can have in the mature (Morgagnian) and hypermature stages. This has important implications for the planning of timely cataract intervention services and in assigning priorities for surgical intervention, if irreversible blinding complications are to be averted.

The pathway to blindness in cataract is generally direct and is the result of the impediment that the lens opacity poses to the entry of light beyond the pupil. However, where the lens becomes swollen (intumescent cataract) or hypermature, provoking an inflammatory or cellular (phacolytic) reaction, secondary glaucoma may supervene; if not urgently and appropriately managed, this can lead to irreversible loss of vision. Secondary glaucoma may also ensue from displacement of long-standing cataractous lenses in the very elderly, either spontaneously or often as a consequence of minor trauma.

Such dislocation may, however, be caused intentionally, as in the procedure called "couching". This ancient technique is still practised in some developing countries, often by itinerant traditional

practitioners in remote rural areas not served by cataract surgical services. The procedure is very likely to produce severe complications which, more often than not, render the eye blind within a very short period of time.

Symptoms and signs

Symptoms

An opacity of the lens may be present without causing any symptoms, and may be discovered only on routine ocular examination.

A gradual and painless deterioration of vision in an older person is generally suggestive of cataract. However, other conditions, such as chronic glaucoma, macular changes in diabetes mellitus, and senile macular degeneration, need to be excluded.

One of the earliest visual disturbances with cataract is glare or intolerance of bright light, such as direct sunlight or the headlights of an oncoming motor vehicle. The amount of glare or dazzle will vary with the location and size of the opacity, those occurring in the pupillary area causing symptoms out of proportion to their size. In the early stages, the visual acuity may be normal on routine testing. As the lens opacity progresses, the quality of vision begins to suffer, with an associated fall in acuity of both distance and near vision.

However, where nuclear sclerosis predominates, an improvement in near vision may become apparent as a result of developing myopia of lenticular origin. Thus an individual who has hitherto required glasses for near work may find that it is possible to dispense with them. However, at the same time, the visual acuity for distance becomes impaired. Before long, the individual's activities are restricted as a result of the further progression of the opacity, and surgical removal of the lens is necessary.

Other visual disturbances include misty vision, dulling of colour sense and occasionally monocular double vision. The consequences of lens-induced uveitis and secondary glaucoma have been referred to earlier; these are heralded by severe pain and redness in the eye. This often occurs in patients who have earlier had vision restored in one eye but have ignored a long-standing cataract in the other eye.

Signs

Evidence of lowered visual acuity together with a dull or absent red reflex is suggestive of the diagnosis of cataract. However,

cloudiness of the cornea or vitreous body from any cause needs to be excluded. When the cataract is more developed, a grey or white pupil is observed. In mature cataract, vision may be reduced to the perception of hand movements at close range or even light perception. It is important to test for light projection in such eyes to exclude possible underlying disease of, or damage to, the retina or optic nerve.

The pupil in eyes with cataract is normally briskly reactive to light. This is an important clinical sign which denotes healthy retinal and optic nerve function and is predictive of a successful outcome following surgery.

2. Cataract as a public health problem

The type of cataract that constitutes a public health problem is the age-related opacification of the lens that impairs vision to such an extent that occupational pursuits or the activities of daily living are severely restricted. Such restrictions lead to economic and psychological deprivation that adversely affects the quality of life.

The growing life expectancy worldwide, and particularly in developing countries, is already leading to a rapid increase in the number of elderly people. In the current absence of proven methods for preventing or delaying the progression of human cataract, this ageing of the population will lead to a phenomenal increase in the number of the cataract blind.

Age-related cataract, which is usually bilateral, is amenable to surgical treatment that is both safe and effective. Surgical output, particularly in developing countries, cannot cope even with the new cases of blindness due to cataract, leading to an inevitable "snowballing" of the number unattended. This is the public health dimension of the problem that needs to be addressed.

Prevalence

A 1994 update of the global data on blindness reveals that there are an estimated 38 million blind people worldwide, and a further 110 million with low vision who are at risk of becoming blind.[1] In nearly half of these individuals, the visual impairment is due to cataract. There are, however, marked differences in the prevalence of cataract-related blindness and low vision between countries, as a result not only of demographic variation, but also of socioeconomic factors such as the availability of eye care services for cataract

[1] Thylefors B et al. Global data on blindness. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 1995, 73:115–121.

Table 1. Prevalence of blindness and percentage of cataract-related blindness in certain countries

Region	Population (thousands)	Prevalence of blindness (%)	Cataract-related blindness per 100 blind
Africa			
Chad	5680	2.3[a]	48
Congo	2276	0.3[a]	81
Gambia	875	0.7[a]	55
Eastern Mediterranean			
Saudi Arabia	14870	1.5[a]	55
Tunisia	8060	3.9[b]	52
South-East Asia			
India	849515	0.7[a]	81
Indonesia	178232	1.2[a]	70
Nepal	18916	0.8[a]	67
Thailand	55853	1.1[a]	57
Western Pacific			
China	1333698	0.4[a]	52
Japan	123519	0.3[b]	23
Philippines	61480	0.8[a]	87

[a] Less than 3/60 in better eye.
[b] Less than or equal to 6/60 in better eye.

surgery. The percentage of cataract-related blindness in relation to the overall prevalence of blindness is given for selected countries in Table 1, above.

Incidence

It is estimated that there is an annual increase in the backlog of people requiring surgery of over 2 million persons newly blind from

cataract; this is compounded by the demand for surgery at earlier stages of visual impairment in many communities, in keeping with socioeconomic development. These figures for incidence are based on prospective studies in pilot areas, which do not lend themselves to extrapolation to other areas—particularly developing countries—and are thus subject to considerable uncertainty.

In any computation of the target number of people to be treated within a given time, it is necessary to take a number of factors into account, including the existing backlog, the estimated surgical output, the attrition from mortality of persons blind from cataract, and the incidence of new cases estimated from demographic data.

Methods of estimating the annual incidence of new cases of cataract blindness have been described in some countries. One such calculation takes into account the point prevalence of cataract (derived from a blindness survey), an estimated annual incidence (based on questionnaire responses during the survey), the annual rate of increase in the age cohort with cataract blindness (from demographic data), and various assumptions about death rates and surgical coverage rates.

In another country, a simpler method for calculating annual incidence in different age groups was used taking into account the prevalence of cataract blindness in the age subgroup with the highest rate, i.e. over 60 years of age, life expectancy at age of entry into the group, the number of people entering this population subgroup annually (from demographic data), and the number of years from entry into this group until death.

However, neither of these methods is easily applicable and the results of proper cohort studies must therefore be awaited before one that is both practical and reliable can be developed.

Age

Senile cataract generally occurs in persons above the age of 50 years. It is estimated that 50% of all those in the sixth decade and nearly 100% in the age group 80 years and older have some opacity. These lens opacities are not necessarily associated with visual impairment or blindness.

The prevalence of senile cataract increases with age, and this trend is clearly seen in blindness prevalence studies. It is therefore important to look at the likely demographic trends in respect of the elderly population (over 60 years) in the developing countries over the next 20–30 years. In developing countries, infant and childhood mortality rates are falling and people are living longer. It has been

estimated that, while the size of the elderly population in the developed countries will nearly double between 1980 and 2020, in the developing countries there will be a 240% increase. Thus, for instance, China and India alone can expect to have 270 million more elderly citizens in 2020 than in 1980. This has important implications in terms of the absolute numbers of cataract-blind persons requiring attention over the next two or three decades. Moreover, in many countries in Asia and Africa, it is reported that senile cataract is being seen in 40- to 50-year-olds, and sometimes even earlier.

Sex

Although a preponderance of cataract among females has been reported from some countries, this may merely indicate the relatively poorer access of women in general, for one reason or another, to surgical services in those countries. The longer life expectancy of women in some countries also needs to be taken into account.

Possible risk factors

The mechanisms of cataract formation in the human lens are as yet not fully understood. Several studies have focused on epidemiological parameters, such as genetic and environmental influences. Others have been directed towards developmental and molecular biological aspects of the lens and its metabolic and biochemical disorders.

The diversity of the cataractous process, in respect both of morphological appearance and of natural history, has rendered these studies particularly cumbersome and complicated, making it difficult to draw statistically significant and valid conclusions on causal relationships. This is further complicated by the multifactorial pathogenesis of senile cataract.

The possible risk factors for cataract can be grouped under the following headings:

- demographic factors;
- other host factors, including genetic and disease-associated factors;
- environmental factors.

The age of onset of "senile" cataract and its rate of progression also vary widely from one geographical region and climatic zone to

another, and various environmental and nutritional or metabolic factors are considered to be responsible for these variations.

Demographic factors

The relation of cataract to the ageing process has been described earlier (pp. 7–8). The lens participates in the immunocytological and metabolic changes taking place in the body in ageing, and the lens changes perhaps reflect these processes.

Host factors

Many drugs and chemicals induce cataract formation under experimental conditions, and some have been associated with cataract formation as a consequence of ingestion or topical absorption when used as medication, e.g. steroids.

Among a number of systemic, metabolic, and neurological disorders associated with cataract, diabetes mellitus is perhaps the most important from a public health perspective. After 40 years of age, cataract is commoner in diabetic individuals than in nondiabetics; it is also known that its rate of progression is more rapid in diabetics. With the increase in prevalence of diabetes in many parts of the world, including developing countries, diabetes-related cataract could well be of increasing concern in the future. Altered glucose metabolism in the lens, leading to the accumulation of sorbitol, is considered to be associated with osmotic changes leading ultimately to opacification. Trials are under way to test the efficacy of drugs such as aldose reductase inhibitors in preventing or delaying diabetes-related cataract.

A genetic predisposition to cataract formation seen in consanguineous relatives may also account for the ethnic differences in prevalence found in some epidemiological studies. The underlying cause may be the existence of pharmacogenetic variations that selectively predispose such individuals to environmental cataractogenic influences.

Cataractogenesis has been extensively studied, and it has been suggested that nutrition is one of the many factors that sensitize the lens proteins to change. Differences in nutritional status and dietary composition have been offered as an explanation for the differences in the prevalence and age of onset of cataract in developing as opposed to developed countries.

The coexistence of severe diarrhoea and malnutrition is well recognized. The role of severe diarrhoea *per se* in the causation of acidosis, dehydration, and increased plasma urea concentration has