

For Immediate Release

Staggering Cost of Vision Loss Underscores Urgent Need for National Vision Health Plan, Says Landmark Report

TORONTO (June 23, 2009) – Groundbreaking new research released today by CNIB and the Canadian Ophthalmological Society (COS) places the total financial cost of vision loss in Canada at \$15.8 billion per year – significantly higher than previously estimated. The study's proponents say these costs, which are expected to increase dramatically in the years ahead, underscore the urgent need for Canada to develop a comprehensive national vision health plan.

The \$15.8 billion price tag for vision loss includes \$8.6 billion in direct health-related costs – the highest of such costs of any disease category in Canada including diabetes, all cancers and cardiovascular disease. It also includes \$7.2 billion in indirect costs, including lost productivity and earnings, care and rehabilitation and assistive devices.

The study is also the first to attribute a value to the human toll of vision loss on Canadians who are directly affected. This burden of disease adds a further \$11.7 billion to the bill for Canada – the largest of all costs attributed to vision loss.

“The findings from this study represent the most definitive data now available about the cost of vision loss in Canada,” says Dr. Alan Cruess, Professor and Head District Chief Department of Ophthalmology, Dalhousie University/Capital Health and past president of COS. “With the demographic shift, we know these costs will spiral upwards and overburden our healthcare system unless we take action now.”

The study also examined who bears the cost of vision loss, finding that the largest financial costs come out of taxpayers' pockets: federal and provincial governments bear 55 per cent of the costs and “all of society” bears a further 19 per cent. Individuals with vision loss bear significant personal costs totaling \$3.5 billion annually.

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“When I lost my vision five years ago, I went from being employed and independent to living on CPP with little hope of another job in my community. I had to go to another province for additional assessments which the provincial government paid for,” says Terry Gardner, 51, of Newfoundland. “But vision loss affected so much more than my financial bottom line. Depression, lost friendships and strain on my personal relationships – all these were the costs of vision loss to me.”

Today’s troubling new statistics underscore the urgent need for Canada to create a comprehensive plan to address all aspects of vision health and vision loss. Such a plan could reduce the financial and human costs of vision loss through cost-effective preventative measures, improved access to proven treatments, and employment accommodation and rehabilitation services for people affected by vision loss.

Although the Canadian government made a commitment to the World Health Organization in 2003 to create such a plan, they have yet to do so.

“The Canadian government needs to develop and implement a comprehensive vision health plan now,” says John M. Rafferty, CNIB President and CEO. “Some interim measures have been taken, but we literally can’t afford to wait any longer. Every year we wait, more than 45,000 Canadians lose their vision. Every year that goes by costs Canadians \$15.8 billion.”

As Canada’s foremost vision health organization, CNIB is eager to work with government leaders and the private sector to shape and guide future policy for healthcare funding and support for people with vision loss.

“CNIB is eager to be a part of building this plan, but the scope of the effort far eclipses our role as a donor-funded charity focused on delivering services,” says Rafferty. “The government must act now to make vision health a public health priority.”

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About the Study

The Cost of Vision Loss in Canada was commissioned by CNIB and the Canadian Ophthalmological Society (COS) in 2008 and conducted by Access Economics Pty Limited, a world-leading independent economic consulting firm who are specialists in model-based health forecasting and analysis. The firm has previously completed cost of vision loss studies in Australia and in the United States. Using prevalence-based and conservative methodology, The Cost of Vision Loss in Canada builds on existing authoritative sources of Canadian data and research (as of 2007). The research takes into account Canada's multicultural society and future demographic trends. It uses known costs wherever possible accurately reflecting real Canadian expenditures and government policies.

About CNIB

CNIB is a nationwide, community-based, registered charity committed to public education, research and the vision health of all Canadians. CNIB provides the services and support necessary to enjoy a good quality of life, while living with vision loss. Please visit www.cnib.ca.

About the Canadian Ophthalmological Society (COS)

The COS is the national specialty society representing eye physicians and surgeons whose mission is to assure the provision of comprehensive eye care to all Canadians. www.eyesite.ca

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