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Seva Foundation Launches the AIDS Eye Initiative
New program to prevent AIDS-related blindness in developing countries

BERKELEY, CA (January 28, 2008) – New research supported by Seva Foundation found that cytomegalovirus (CMV) retinitis is causing unnecessary blindness and mortality in AIDS patients in developing countries. Importantly, the study suggests that successful management of CMV retinitis in these countries is a realistic goal.

In response, Seva's Center for Innovation in Eye Care is launching the *AIDS Eye Initiative*, a new program designed to address the problem.

Breakthrough Study Points to Need

A new study titled [Cytomegalovirus Retinitis: The Neglected Disease of the AIDS Pandemic](#), published in PLoS Medicine, the online journal of the Public Library of Science, indicates that CMV retinitis is causing blindness among young adults with AIDS in developing countries. The research was led by Dr. David Heiden, a long-time Seva consultant and an ophthalmologist at the California Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco, and was conducted in collaboration with Médecins Sans Frontières and other groups.

"Our research found that up to one third of patients with advanced AIDS in Myanmar, Cambodia and Thailand suffered from CMV retinitis, an infection that can be blinding," Dr. Heiden explains. "The study points to the need to integrate some eye care services with AIDS management services at the primary care level — a need that hadn't previously emerged in AIDS programs in developing countries. This new awareness lays the foundation for creating diagnostic and treatment protocols that will prevent blindness among AIDS patients and may also help reduce mortality associated with CMV retinitis."

Seva Plans Innovative Response

Dr. Suzanne Gilbert, Director of Seva's Center for Innovation in Eye Care, says the research sheds light on a growing cause of blindness in developing countries that had been overlooked until now. "CMV retinitis just hadn't caught the attention of international eye care organizations. But this new research makes it clear — if we want to prevent blindness in developing countries being hit hard by the AIDS pandemic, we need to tackle this issue."

That is exactly what Seva intends to do with the AIDS Eye Initiative. "The AIDS Eye Initiative is going to fulfill an unmet need," Dr. Gilbert explains. "While there's been a lot of progress in establishing primary care for AIDS patients in resource-poor developing countries, AIDS-related blindness in those countries has gone untreated. The challenge is that those countries don't have ophthalmologists available, and the drugs to treat CMV retinitis are prohibitively expensive. What the AIDS Eye Initiative will do is create a replicable model for managing CMV retinitis at the primary care level by making it easy for primary care doctors to examine and diagnose the eyes of their AIDS patients. We'll also be working to find ways to lower the cost of drug treatments. It's a huge undertaking, but we have the expertise and the network of partners that can make it happen."

Among the Seva partners signed on to work with AIDS Eye Initiative are Aravind Eye Care System (India) and Kilimanjaro Center for Community Ophthalmology (Tanzania). Each will be involved in training and field testing for the project. Dr. David Heiden has been brought on to serve as Medical Director of the AIDS Eye Initiative.

About Seva Foundation

Working in nine countries in addition to the United States, Seva Foundation provides financial resources and technical expertise to help communities build sustainable solutions that improve the health and economic security of people in need. Widely known for its sight-restoring eye care programs, Seva also works with indigenous communities in Guatemala and Mexico, along with Native American communities — supporting projects in the area of health and wellness, community development, environmental protection and cultural preservation.

For more information, please visit: www.seva.org
