Introduction

The mission of the Lions’ SightFirst program is to support the development of comprehensive eye care systems to fight the major causes of blindness and vision loss and care for the blind and visually impaired. The program funds high-quality, sustainable projects that deliver eye care services, develop infrastructure, train personnel and/or provide rehabilitation & education in underserved communities.

With funds raised through Campaign SightFirst II, there is also support for new project areas aimed at providing “vision for all”. These include vision rehabilitation and education for those who are blind or have low vision and vision research initiatives. While research is different from the traditional SightFirst strategies of service delivery and capacity building, it has the potential to improve these core program activities and benefit blindness prevention efforts worldwide.

This paper, prepared as part of a long range planning effort mandated by the SightFirst Advisory Committee (SAC), summarizes the conclusions of the SFLRP Working Group and recommends strategies for future SightFirst support of research.

SightFirst & Research

Drafted in 2003, the SightFirst II campaign case statement proposed a total of US$16 million for the following research activities:

- Support of specific research initiatives at Lions Eye Centers by matching funds raised to support the centers up to US$200,000 each year.

- Provision of high-profile annual “genius” grants to exceptionally promising researchers.

- Funds to enable Lions Eye Research Centers to collaborate closely and form a worldwide network.

A research discussion group meeting was held in Oak Brook on May 12, 2009 to evaluate these and other research opportunities, and recommend strategies for future SightFirst support. The meeting was chaired by PIP Jimmy Ross and included input from the following professionals: Dr. G.N. Rao, LV Prasad Eye Institute & SAC Member, Dr. Silvio Mariotti of the World Health
Organization (WHO), Dr. R. Pararajasegaram, IAPB Affiliate and SAC Member and Dr. Jill Keeffe, Professor at the Centre for Eye Research Australia and SightFirst Technical Advisor. Also present were Ed McManus and Phoebe Sebring, consultants for the SFLRP effort, and Phillip Albano, Joshua Friedman, Karim Bengraine, Kristen Eckert and Gina Prendki of the LCIF Sight Programs Department.

Conclusions & Recommendations

For the purposes this paper, research is categorized in three ways – Discovery, Operational or Evaluative.

Discovery research is basic research often conducted by high-profile institutions over a long period of time. The U.S. National Eye Institute, for example, invests more than US$700 million per year in basic research.

Operational research is the monitoring and evaluation typically performed on SightFirst projects, but with additional rigor (like the addition of an epidemiologist and statistician) to collect data that is of publishable quality. It is critical to identifying barriers to services among particular groups of people or within a community.

Similarly, evaluative research is rigorous collection of data – often in the form of surveys, conducted at various scales – to identify needs and assess strategies.

The SFLRP Working Group has developed the following conclusions and recommendations for future SightFirst support of research.

Conclusions

Discovery Research

- Discovery research traditionally requires a substantial investment of time and resources. While the proposed allocation of US$16 million is significant overall, the annual amount available for investment over the course of SightFirst II is limited. Significant additional resources would also be required to identify and vet discovery research proposals.

- Discovery research involves significant risk. SightFirst funds might be invested in research that appears promising, but the likelihood of breakthrough outcomes or direct benefit to the program is never assured.

- Most worthy discovery research, especially that which takes place in developed countries, is likely supported by governments and private funders able to make and sustain much larger contributions.
Operational & Evaluative Research

- The second phase of SightFirst emphasizes high-quality, data-driven projects. To help ensure this, there will be times when modest funding is needed. In comparison to discovery research, however, the cost of operational research is minimal and the information gathered can be used to inform other SightFirst projects and the blindness prevention field.

- Operational research outcomes will be directly linked to evaluating and improving the SightFirst program and its mission of service delivery and capacity building.

- Evaluative research outcomes will have an indirect link to furthering the SightFirst mission by helping to identify needs and develop strategies. Significant opportunities exist for SightFirst to pioneer critical research into service issues of equity, capacity building and sustainability.

- The availability of monies for operational and evaluative data may help create research capacities in developing countries.

- The funds informally set aside provide SightFirst with an opportunity to conduct a significant volume of research, as well as become a leading catalyst of blindness prevention operational inquiry. (Operational and evaluative research initiatives range from US$5,000-US$200,000.)

The group concluded that while research ideas proposed in the campaign case statement might provide naming opportunities for Lions, the return on investment as well as the overall funding demands of other critical SightFirst activity, suggests that public health research, rather than basic research, may be a more financially feasible and impactful option.

Recommendations

1. SFLRP Working Group recommends continued emphasis on high-quality, data-driven projects and the approval of funds for expanded monitoring and evaluation budgets included in SightFirst projects.

2. The SFLRP Working Group recommends the identification of critical program operation issues and the development of a Request for Proposal (RFP) process whereby specialized resource centers would be invited to compete for funds to evaluate existing strategies and propose alternatives, as appropriate.
3. The SFLRP Working Group recommends that SightFirst funds be available for evaluative research proposals, especially those looking at the issues of equity, capacity building and sustainability in the delivery of eye care.

Next Steps

Should the SAC approve the strategies outlined above, the SFLRP Working Group recommends the following next steps with regards to implementation:

- The new SightFirst grant application, currently in development, will emphasize the importance of and the availability of funds for monitoring and evaluation efforts included as part of a larger SightFirst project objective.

- The Sight Programs Department and SightFirst technical advisors will identify critical program operation issues that might benefit from further investigation. Once these are approved by the SAC, professional assistance will be engaged to aid in the development of an RFP process.

- Formalization of the mechanism by which other organizations might apply for SightFirst funds to conduct evaluative research will evolve as requests are received and evaluated by the Sight Programs Department.