President Wing-Kun Tam, Lions and Lionesses, Knights of the Blind, Crusaders against Darkness, ladies and gentlemen.

It is a great honor and a great pleasure to address the annual International Convention of Lions Clubs. The World Health Organization has been a partner with the Lions Clubs for decades, especially in blindness prevention, care for people with visual and hearing impairments, diabetes awareness and early detection, and screening for cancers, particularly those that are the biggest killers of women in the developing world.

In these countries, cervical cancer is one of the most common cancers of women and a leading killer. Let me personally thank the Lions Clubs for funding Professor Ian Frazer's research that led to the very recent introduction of a vaccine against this cancer.

Lions Clubs International has a huge workforce, more than 1.3 million strong. You have the world's biggest extended family, and you've got attitude: "We Serve." With your ethic of voluntary service as a duty, of compassion delivered with passion, you represent a vast repository of human goodness in a world where too much of the news seems relentlessly depressing.

Your work, your very existence, in fact, is a beacon of hope. A beacon of hope in a profoundly unfair, lopsided world of vast privilege, hoarded by the billionaires, the multimillionaires, indifferent to the misery, the poor health, the early deaths from entirely preventable causes of the bottom-billion people, the people who live on less than a dollar a day.

Last year's massive protests demanding greater social equality gave the world a number of lessons. Social discontent, when confronted with inequalities in income levels, in
opportunities, in access to service, is highly contagious and powerful enough to topple governments. A world that is greatly out of balance, ladies and gentlemen, also in access of health, is neither stable nor secure. Let me illustrate with just a few statistics.

Annual government expenditure on health ranges from as little as one dollar per person to nearly $7,000. The difference in life expectancy between the richest and the poorest countries now exceeds 40 years. Around 2.7 billion people live in countries with no social safety net to cover medical costs. WHO estimates that catastrophic medical bills drive around 100 million people below the poverty line each year.

This is why the difference the Lions make counts in ways that extend far beyond the benefits for better health. The World Health Organization can document the impact of your work with facts and figures. Let me give you one.

From our newest study, released just a few months ago, in the short span of time between 2004 and 2010, six years’ time, the worldwide number of people with visual impairment dropped from 314 million, including 45 million blind, to 285 million with 39 million blind. Ladies and gentlemen, let us give the Lions a big hand! This is a worldwide reduction of nearly 10 percent in just six years. Just think of all the suffering that has been prevented by your good work.

These are not just numbers, ladies and gentlemen, these are six million fewer people who were protected from going blind or had their sight restored. A few months ago, World Health Organization and Lions Clubs signed a Memorandum of Understanding to renew our long-standing and fruitful partnership for the next five years. In particular, to take out childhood blindness, to prevent visual impairment associated with diabetes and to provide systems of comprehensive eye care within communities. These are things your clubs do very well in the ethic of voluntary community service.

Together, together we are also going after the leading infectious diseases that needlessly blind millions. You have already supported the distribution of millions of doses of medicine to control river blindness. You have helped provide surgery that averts the risk of immediate blindness from trachoma, a bacterial infection that thrives in the filth, the dirty faces
with swarming flies of dire and miserable poverty. People, mostly young children and women, go blind from this infection in agonizing pain.

Both diseases have been controlled in a growing number of countries, but we need to go further. We need to go travel that extra mile, and this is the next topic: Our next joint objective is to drive river blindness and blinding trachoma out of existence as public health problems. To get rid of these causes of living darkness once and for all.

Just think about it. There are 1.5 million people in this world blinded by trachoma. This is a number even bigger than the membership of your organization! Think of how much further we can bring these statistics down.

At WHO, we believe that the end of millions of cases of blindness caused by infectious diseases of the poor really is in sight. As your International President Wing-Kun Tam likes to say, let me quote him, "If you never try, you never know." This audience will know the major preventable causes of visual impairment, because you are tackling each and every one of them: Children who need screening and eyeglasses, people with cataracts who need simple and highly effective surgery to see again, to regain that gift of light.

Complications of diabetes, detected and treated too late, or for more than half the world's diabetics, not detected until vision is hopelessly lost. The world has 346 million diabetics. Half of them do not know they have the disease. By the time they know, I think it is too late. They may be presented with visual blindness, kidney failure, amputation or heart disease. So I want to thank you for your vision in taking on this big challenge.

Measles. Again, it is a cause of childhood blindness in the developing world, and is so easily prevented with an inexpensive vaccine. And this is another added value of this vast network of service organizations, and that is your ability to shape community attitudes and behaviors. For example, only people who are respected and trusted within their communities, like your good selves, can persuade parents of the wisdom of having their children immunized against diseases like measles, or get them to agree to sight-restoring eye surgery, or get them to line up for vision tests and where glasses are freely provided.

Ladies and gentlemen, WHO deeply values this vast altruistic network of organizations as a powerful partner. We are fiercely proud to see the global statistics going down so
dramatically and so quickly. Let me summarize these results with just three words: Awesome, amazing and inspiring. And this is what you do. Let me once again thank you.

This is what happens when a posse of yellow vests, a pride of Lions, a family of 1.3 million strong, roars into action. Lions, you are on your way to fully meeting the challenge Helen Keller issued when she spoke at your 1925 convention: to be the Knights of the Blind in a crusade against darkness. Lions, there is nothing you love so much as a good challenge for a worthy cause. Remember, the world still has an estimated 285 million people suffering from visual impairment, including 39 million who are blind. Let me remind you, WHO estimates that around 80 percent of this suffering and blindness could have been prevented or cured.

I know I can give you this challenge with confidence because, let me tell you why. I'm going to do something rather unusual…
(Delivered as a rap song)

I am speaking to a vast
posse of yellow vests
Rap it if you have to
To get the message out

Dress to impress
In your yellow vests
Get the bad guys
Save the eyes

Watch out cataract
under attack
The Lion sleeps tonight: no way!
No time to waste
In your yellow vests!

Forget the “me”
it’s “We”!
Plant a million trees;
Giving glasses to the kiddies see!

Helping WHO
turn on the lights
Insight, foresight, all right

Blindness from bug bites no more
I hear a roar!
Philanthropic to the core
Thank you!