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## **Lions Clubs International Signs New Agreement with WHO to Hasten Fight Against Blindness**

Oak Brook, Illinois, USA, January 4, 2011 – Lions Clubs International (LCI) just announced a new cooperative agreement with the World Health Organization (WHO) to aid global efforts to fight unnecessary blindness and to tackle newly emerging threats to vision health from diabetes and other conditions.

At a ceremony to announce the expanded cooperation between the two organizations, Wing-Kun Tam, a Hong Kong-based businessman who is currently president of Lions Clubs International said: "Lions Clubs International has been supporting the WHO for more than 20 years in the fight against avoidable blindness, and we have accomplished a great deal to help reduce the rate of blindness. However, the pattern of blindness is changing in the world due to aging populations, the alarming rise of diabetes and diabetic eye disease, and also from increases in visual impairment affecting children for a variety of reasons. To help the WHO and other organizations like ours meet these challenges, we are honored to increase our financial support of WHO to help the world tackle these challenges."

In her remarks, WHO Director General Dr. Margaret Chan said: "The Lions can take much credit for helping the world make advances against many conditions causing blindness thanks to the support they have provided WHO and their own actions to support cataract surgery and to combat communicable diseases that have traditionally caused most blindness. The work in these areas must and shall continue, but there are new challenges to vision health requiring even more attention and more resources. We are delighted to be expanding our long-standing collaboration with the Lions in this regard."

Specifically, as part of the expanded collaboration, the Lions will invest more than US\$3 million dollars to help WHO develop 26 Child Friendly Eye Care Centers in lesser developed countries as part of the Lions-WHO Project for the Elimination of Avoidable Childhood Blindness.

Presently, more than a half million children go blind every year, and more than half of those in developing regions die within one to two years of going blind. While advances in treatment and human resource development have helped curb avoidable blindness in children, financial resources are lacking in the midst of other health priorities. Fortunately, the Lions Clubs, now in entering a second phase of this project, have made it a priority.

Lions will also provide more financial support to WHO for the prevention and control of diabetic eye disease, a complication of diabetes. The number of people with diabetes worldwide is estimated at 246 million and may rise to 380 million by 2025. The Lions will support WHO in training health care workers in developing countries to better detect and treat diabetic eye disease, while the Lions themselves will increase their vision screening programs to raise awareness of the condition.



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The Lions organization will be responsible for providing funding for agreed activities with WHO relating to the areas of collaboration through Lions' SightFirst program.

The SightFirst program funds high-quality, sustainable projects that deliver eye care services, develop infrastructure, train personnel and/or provide rehabilitation and education in underserved communities. Of utmost concern are the major causes of blindness and vision impairment: cataract, river blindness, trachoma, uncorrected refractive error and, especially in developed nations, diabetic eye diseases and glaucoma. Lions have raised more than US\$415 million to fund the SightFirst program and save sight around the world.

In China, the Lions SightFirst Program has collaborated with the government since 1995 to provide more than 5 million cataract surgeries, to equip more than 350 eye centers and to train thousands of eye care personnel.

Founded in 1917, LCI is the world's largest voluntary service club organization, with 1.35 million members in more than 46,000 clubs in 207 countries and geographic areas. It is completely non-sectarian, non-political and non-religious. Lions members work closely together to answer needs at the community level, funding projects that range from providing disaster relief, feeding the hungry, and partnering with other world organizations in the elimination of preventable diseases such as measles and trachoma.

The World Health Organization, or WHO, is a Specialized Agency of the United Nations system whose objective is the attainment by all peoples of the highest possible level of health. Health is defined as a complete state of physical, mental and social wellbeing.