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THE SCOPE OF THE EYE INJURY PROBLEM

Injury is recognized as a significant public health problem in the U.S. The National Research Council reported that:

*"Injury is probably the most under-recognized major health problem facing the nation. The study of injury presents unparalleled opportunities for reducing morbidity...and for realizing significant savings in both financial and human terms."*¹

Available information on eye injury points out the magnitude of the problem that Prevent Blindness America (PBA) must address.

An estimated 2.4 million eye injuries occur in the U.S. annually. Nearly 35% of these eye injuries happen to persons age 17 and younger. A foreign body in the eye is the most common type of injury, accounting for 35% of the total. Open wounds and contusions each account for about 25%, and the remaining injuries are burns.²

Nearly one million Americans have lost some degree of sight (a chronic or permanent disability) due to an eye injury. About 7% have a severe impairment and about 79% of those are blind in one eye. Eye injuries account for 40,000 to 50,000 new cases of impaired vision each year. Injury is not a major cause of blindness, but it is one of the most common causes of monocular blindness.³

According to 2002 statistics, there were an estimated 262,000 product-related eye injuries treated in U.S. hospital emergency rooms. The categories contributing to the highest injuries were related to household (124,998), workplace (96,938), and sports (35,633).⁴

Information from a 1988 study conducted by the National Institutes for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) indicates that between 600,000-700,000 occupational eye injuries occur per year, with 16% in the construction industry.⁵

Founded in 1908, Prevent Blindness America is the nation's leading volunteer eye health and safety organization dedicated to fighting blindness and saving sight. Focused on promoting a continuum of vision care, Prevent Blindness America touches the lives of millions of people each year through public and professional education, advocacy, certified vision screening training, community and patient service programs and research.

Current estimates regarding the cost of eye injuries are limited to those injuries occurring in the workplace. Disabling work injuries in the entire nation totaled about 3,600,000 in 1995, the last year for which data is available. In these instances, a disabling work-related injury is defined as "an injury causing death, permanent disability or any degree of temporary total disability beyond the day of the accident. An estimated 140,000 of these injuries involved the eye(s).⁶

The average worker's compensation payment for disabling eye injuries is estimated at \$6,606. This includes indemnity compensation and medical payments.⁷ Using these estimates, the total direct cost of workers' compensation claims for disabling eye injuries in the workplace can be estimated at \$924 million.

When other indirect costs are included (the value of time lost by non-injured workers and production slowdowns), the loss due to a disabling injury is estimated at \$28,000.⁸ This would place the total cost of 140,000 disabling work-related eye injuries each year at \$3,920,000,000. When the cost of all other non-disabling eye injuries are included, the total easily exceeds \$4 billion.

Most injuries can be prevented. In others, the effects can be minimized. Research may eventually find ways to successfully repair or replace severely damaged eyes.

There is a great need for epidemiological studies, legislative and advocacy activities, research, public and professional education, and awareness activities covering eye safety and injury prevention.

References

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7. *Injury Facts*. National Safety Council, 2000. (based on the National Council on Compensation Insurance's Detail Claim Information file.)
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