

Pakistan's Journey towards the Elimination of Trachoma (Raja Mumtaz Memorial Lecture)

Asad Aslam Khan¹

¹College of Vision and allied Health Sciences, Lahore

Pakistan's journey towards the elimination of trachoma is a remarkable example of collaborative effort, perseverance, and strategic planning in public health. The efforts began with groundbreaking impact of Hugh Taylor's 1980 report.¹ The report estimated that the prevalence of blindness in Pakistan was around 2%, with cataract identified as the most common cause. It also highlighted a gross mismatch in human resources, noting that 45 out of 64 districts were without an ophthalmologist. Moreover, it emphasized the urban-rural imbalance, pointing out that most ophthalmologists were based in urban areas, while the burden of blindness was concentrated in rural communities. That report served as a wake-up call for Pakistan's government, leading to major reforms in the country's eye care delivery system.

Since the last International Agency for prevention of Blindness (IAPB) report in 2019, Pakistan has made considerable progress.² The prevalence of blindness, which stood at 1.76% in 1990, has now decreased to 0.45% in 2022. This reflects the country's remarkable strides in providing accessible and effective eye care. In 1980, according to Taylor's observations, Pakistani surgeons performed less than one cataract surgery per day.¹ The cataract surgical rate (CSR) has surged to 5,340 surgeries per million population more than double the WHO's recommended threshold.² Pakistan now ranks 12th globally and first in the Eastern Mediterranean Region in CSR.³

Recently, Pakistan has been certified by WHO as a trachoma-free country. This milestone was achieved after a concerted national effort. Pakistan was included in the WHO's Global Elimination of Trachoma (GET) 2020 initiative.⁴ Professor Asad Aslam served as Chair of the National Trachoma Task Force and Sajjad Pervaiz as the National Coordinator.

*Correspondence: Asad Aslam Khan
Professor of Emeritus. College of Vision and allied Health Sciences, Lahore
Email: drasad@lhr.comsats.net.pk*

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This initiative was aimed at eliminating trachoma by 2020.⁴ The goal was achieved with a vital support of international partners such as the Fred Hollows Foundation, Sight-savers, Christian Blind Mission, and national NGOs like LRBT, Al-Shifa Trust, and Al-Ibrahim Eye Hospital. Their collaboration was pivotal to this success.

Between 2001 and 2017, trachoma rapid assessments, population-based prevalence surveys, and the Global Trachoma Mapping Project were conducted across 52 districts.⁵ Additional assessments in 2022 covered the remaining low-priority districts. These findings informed the National Trachoma Elimination Program, which was launched from 2017 to 2022. During this period, Pakistan implemented the WHO-recommended SAFE strategy: surgery for trachomatous trichiasis (TT), mass distribution of antibiotics (primarily azithromycin), education on facial cleanliness in schools and communities, and environmental improvements including sanitation and hygiene infrastructure.⁶ Impact surveys conducted between 2021 and 2022 revealed that TT prevalence had fallen below 1% and TF (Trachoma Follicles) prevalence below 5%, both meeting WHO's elimination thresholds. This paved the way for WHO's guidance in preparing Pakistan's trachoma elimination dossier, which was finalized in December 2023 and submitted in January 2024. By July 2024, WHO officially certified Pakistan as trachoma-free, with the certificate presented to the Prime Minister in October 2024.⁷

There were many problems encountered in this process. During mass antibiotic distribution, COVID-19 disruptions and WHO warnings on emerging azithromycin resistance led to a halt in antibiotic use. However, efforts pivoted towards hygiene education and environmental improvements, including the construction of latrines and handwashing facilities. This shift, though unexpected, proved surprisingly effective, with the prevalence of trachoma dropping even further. However, widespread over-the-counter

use of azithromycin during COVID-19 may have contributed, perhaps inadvertently, to reducing trachoma prevalence, a blessing in disguise.

The success of this program is a testament to the collective efforts of international NGOs like the Fred Hollows Foundation, Sight-savers, and CBM; national NGOs such as LRBT, Al-Shifa Trust, and Al-Ibrahim Eye Hospital; government bodies including the Ministry of Health and Provincial Health Departments; academic institutions like the College of Ophthalmology & Allied Vision Sciences (COAVS) and King Edward Medical University (KEMU); professional bodies like the Ophthalmological Society of Pakistan (OSP); and multilateral agencies like WHO and IAPB.

Pakistan's WHO certification as a trachoma-free country is a proud milestone, the culmination of tireless work by the National Committee for Eye Health, the National Trachoma Task Force, OSP, public and private partners, NGOs, and international collaborators. The OSP has been requested to formally recognize and award certificates and shields to the individuals and institutions whose efforts made this achievement possible. This editorial is dedicated to all those who played a part in making Pakistan's elimination of trachoma a reality, a testament to the power of partnership, perseverance, and vision.

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