

One million Asian children living with blindness

October 8 2014, by David Ellis

University of Adelaide eye surgeons will conduct a national survey of blindness in Laos in the latest effort to prevent and repair blindness for people in South-East Asia.

Working with the Adelaide-based charity group Sight For All, staff from the University's Discipline of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences will launch the survey next month to better understand the size and scope of [blindness](#) in the landlocked Asian nation.

Speaking in the lead up to World Sight Day (Thursday 9 October), University of Adelaide ophthalmology lecturer and chairman of Sight For All, Dr James Muecke AM, says the survey in Laos is one of dozens of activities being undertaken among some of Australia's nearest neighbours.

"An estimated 45 million people worldwide are blind, and half of these - roughly the size of Australia's entire population - are in Asia and the Western Pacific," Dr Muecke says.

"There are one million blind children living in developing countries in Asia. Unless something is done to address their blindness, they will live with that disability for the rest of their lives, receiving little to no education and greatly reducing their quality of life."

The team - involving more than 100 eye care professionals from around Australia and New Zealand - has been working in nine countries

including Bangladesh, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam to conduct research and education programs, and to support local infrastructure.

"Our studies into the state of blindness and poor vision give us the understanding we and our partner countries need to help address the problem," Dr Muecke says.

He says research has consistently found that half of all blindness in Asian children is avoidable. "In three of the five countries where we've conducted childhood blindness studies, the leading cause was found to be measles. It costs less than \$1 per child to vaccinate against measles, so this is a sign of a very poor nation when it can't afford to vaccinate its children.

"As part of our childhood blindness study in Cambodia, we discovered a new gene for a blinding condition called congenital glaucoma. It's through discoveries such as these, and our increasing understanding of blindness, that we hope one day to achieve sight for all," Dr Muecke says.

As well as conducting work in South-East Asia, Dr Muecke says there is also a strong focus on Aboriginal eye health in Australia. "The good news is that Aboriginal children have among the best vision in the world. The big concern is diabetes among adults. There has been an 80-fold increase in diabetes in the last 30 years, and that leads to a high risk of blindness. This is highly preventable or treatable," he says.

Provided by University of Adelaide

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