

CHAPTER I

DEFINITION : VISUAL IMPAIRMENT

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1. Definition

In India, the broad definition of visual impairment as adopted in the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995 as well as under the National Programme for Control of Blindness (NPCB) is given below:

1.1 **Blindness** : refers to a condition where a person suffers from any of the following conditions, namely:

- Total absence of sight; or
- Visual acuity not exceeding 6/60 or 20/200 (Snellen) in the better eye even with correction lenses; or
- Limitation of the field of vision subtending an angle of 20 degree or worse.

For deciding the blindness, the visual acuity as well as field of vision have been considered.

1.2 **Low Vision**: The Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995 also recognizes low vision as a category of disability and defines it as follows:

“Person with low vision” means a person with impairment of visual functioning even after treatment or standard refractive

correction but who uses or is potentially capable of using vision for the planning or execution of a task with appropriate assistive device”.

This definition is incomplete as it inadvertently omits quantification of the acuity as well as the field of vision as is done in the case of the WHO definition. It is desirable to modify this definition and the following quantification should be added:

“Low vision are those who suffer visual acuity between 20/200 to 70/200 (Snellen) or 6/18 to 6/60 in the better eye after the best possible correction or a Field of Vision between 20 to 30 degrees”.

The WHO working definition of Low Vision (WHO, 1992) is as follows:

“A person with low vision is one who has impairment of visual functioning even after treatment, and/or standard refractive correction, and has a visual acuity of less than 6/18 to light perception or a visual field of less than 10 degrees from the point of fixation, but who uses, or is potentially able to use, vision for the planning and/or execution of a task”.

The points emphasized are that there is significantly reduced vision, visual performance is affected but that there still is vision that can be used. This last point is very important: if there is usable vision, training to use that vision might be possible. In addition, this person is not labelled blind.

Table 1.1

Categories of visual impairment

Category	Corrected VA-better eye	WHO Definition Standard*	Working#	Indian Definition
0	6/6-6/18	Normal	Normal	Normal
1	<6/18-6/60	Visual Impairment	Low Vision	Low Vision
2	<6/60-3/60	Severe Visual Impairment	Low Vision	Blind
3	<3/60-1/60	Blind	Low Vision	Blind
4	<1/60-PL	Blind	Low Vision	Blind
5	NPL	Blind	Total Blindness	Total Blindness

The standard WHO definition is used in medical reports and publications and is solely based on visual acuity and does not take into account functional vision.

The WHO working definition has been adopted since WHO Consultation in 1992. This working definition is solely used for reporting purposes and should not be used for eligibility of services.

The importance of the functional definition lies in the ‘label’ people are given. Someone with a visual acuity of 2/60 can have useful vision, for example, for mobility. However, he or she will be labelled blind person. The consequence is this person

is than treated as if he/she is a blind. This ignores the usable vision. There should be a difference between legal blindness and functional blindness or low vision.

The WHO standard definition defines blindness as visual acuity of less than 3/60 in the better eye with the best possible correction as compared to that of 6/60 in India. The WHO functional definition, however, considers blindness starting at light perception or when a person has no usable vision. Similarly, a person with visual acuity better than 3/60 but equal or less than 6/60 is graded as “blind” in India, while WHO grades him as low vision.

In India a person with a VA < 6/60 is legally blind, which enables to receive certain services and financial benefits. However, a person who is legally blind can still have useful vision to do certain tasks, as can be seen in the working definition. This refers to the fact that they still have functional vision, which is the use of vision for a particular purpose.

For India or other developing countries, it is essential to maintain the legal definition of blindness at the level of visual acuity of 6/60 (20/200 Snellen) or less and field of vision of 20 degree or less. Already the travel concessions, scholarship and other benefits are very meagre, if “*perception of light*” to “*no perception of light*” is considered blindness, a large of persons who are at present availing these concessions would fall outside the eligibility criteria and thus remain bereft of these benefits. Alternatively, if these concessions are extended to all the persons with low vision in the acuity range of 6/18 to “*perception of light*” as defined by WHO, the appropriate Government may not be able to meet the demand due to financial constraints. For India and other developing countries, it is desirable to maintain the definition of blindness as adopted in the Persons

with Disability Act, 1995, i.e. visual acuity of 6/60 (20/200) or less and field of vision of 20 degree and less and to consider all the persons in the range of acuity of 6/18 to 6/60 (20/60 to 20/200) as persons with low vision.

Thus the recommended definition for low vision in Indian context should be “*Low vision are those who suffer visual acuity between 20/200 to 70/200 (Snellen) or 6/18 to 6/60 in the better eye after the best possible correction.*”

1.3 One-Eyed Person: There is a controversy regarding the inclusion of one-eyed persons in the category of blindness. The definition of blindness adopted in India exclude people with impairment only in one eye from the purview of blindness. Even in medical parlance, disability is synonymous to the physical impairment and the level of such impairment has been prescribed for certifying a person to be disabled. Generally, the impairment of 40 percent or more is considered a handicap. As percentage of impairment in the case of a one-eyed person is only 30 percent, according to the approved definition in medical parlance, a person with one good eye is not a blind person. In short, a person with visual impairment of 40 per cent or more is considered a blind person.

The Committee of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment on Recommendation of Standard Definition of Disability recommended that one eye-eyed persons should be excluded from the other categories of visual impairment so that facilities and concessions available to severely and profoundly visually impaired persons are not eroded. The committee, however, felt that loss of one eye would not be considered as a disqualification on medical grounds unless a particular post is of such a technical nature that it requires of a person to have the coordinated use of both eyes or three dimensional vision.

1.4 Persons with Deafblindness

Deafblindness is a condition presenting other difficulties than those caused by deafness and blindness. It is an “umbrella” term which can include children and adults who may suffer from varying degrees of visual and hearing impairment, perhaps combined with learning difficulties and physical disabilities, which can cause:

- severe communication
- developmental, and
- educational problems.

It includes children and adults who are:

- blind and profoundly deaf
- blind and severely or partially hearing
- partially sighted and profoundly deaf
- partially sighted and severely or partially hearing

(Source : Contact (1993) A Resource for Staff Working with Children who are Deaf and Blind, Edinburgh: Moray House)

2. Explanation of Various Terms

In defining visual impairment, three aspects of vision namely visual acuity, field of vision and visual functioning are considered simultaneously. In a broad sense, visual defects result into loss of clear vision, central vision or peripheral vision.

All these losses are considered by measuring visual acuity, field of vision and level of visual functioning.

2.1 Visual Acuity : It refers to the ability of the eye to see details. The visual acuity for distance is measured as the maximum

distance at which person can see a certain object, divided by the maximum distance at which a person with normal eyesight can see the same object. Thus a visual acuity of 6/60 means that the person examined cannot see, at a distance of 6 meters, the object which a person with normal eyesight would be able to see at 60 meters. If vision is so impaired that to see the biggest E of the E-chart, the person has to come within 6 meters or even nearer, he is considered blind. The simplest method of testing visual acuity is to see whether the person can count fingers at a distance of six meters.

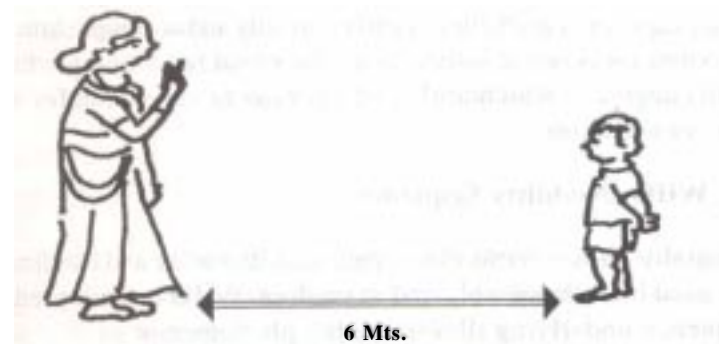


Fig. 1.1 : Finger Count

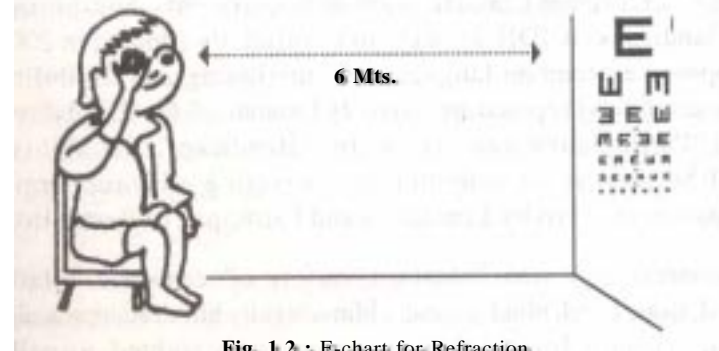


Fig. 1.2 : E-chart for Refraction

2.2 Field of Vision : It refers to the field which both the eyes can easily see in the front. The normal field of vision is 180 degrees in front of eye. It is determined by the Confrontation Test in which mapping is done on a chart having concentric circles marked upon it. The simplest method of testing is to bring snapping finger from the side of the ear to the front, move it up and down, and mark the position where the person can see the finger.

2.3 Visual Functioning : It relates in part to the condition of the eye. It is determined by the experience, motivation, needs and expectation of each individual in relation to whatever visual capacity is available to satisfy curiosity and accomplishment activities for personal satisfaction. The visual functioning refers to the degree to which/ability of a person to use vision for all (daily) activities.

3. WHO Disability Sequence

Generally various terms like impairment, disability and handicap are used interchangeably and at random. WHO has adopted a sequence underlying illness-related phenomenon as:

Disease —> *Impairment* —> *Disability* —> *Handicap*

The International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities & Handicaps (ICIDH-2) likely to be officially adopted in 2001 proposes a common language of functioning and disability. The new terms proposed are “Activity Limitation” for “Disability”; and “Participation Restriction” for “Handicap”. “Disability” will be used as an umbrella term covering all three terms: Impairment, Activity Limitation and Participative Restriction.

In context of vision defects, a variety of terms viz. totally blind, stone blind, blind, partially blind, legally blind, economically blind, visually limited, low vision, partially sighted, visually handicapped, visually impaired etc. are being used.

Table 1.2

Explanation of Various Terms as Adopted by WHO

Condition	Concerned with	Represents
Impairments	Abnormalities of body structure and appearances; organs or system functioning	Disturbances at organ level
Disabilites	Impairment in terms of functional performance and activities	Disturbances at personal level
Handicaps	Disadvantages resulted from impairment and disabilities	Interaction with and adaptation to individual’s surroundings

Source: WHO Classification of Impairments, Disabilities & Handicaps

The visually impaired is an umbrella term, used widely and understood in an educational context. This term is used to describe the total group of persons whose vision is affected by impairments in seeing, irrespective of the nature or extent of these. The term refers to all the persons where vision disadvantage has resulted from impairment as well as disabilities.

In case of persons who are completely without vision, or who have light perception only, it is desirable to use the term “*blind*”. In all other cases of visual defects falling in the definition, the term “*visually impaired*” should preferably be used. For the persons who do not fall in the category of blindness as defined in the Act and whose visual acuity falls between 6/18 and 6/60 in the better eye after the best possible correction, the term “*low vision*” should be used.

In addition, the following should be done:

- a. Use the term “blind” (VA 6/60 or lower) only for legal reasons or to get benefits.
- b. For educational and rehabilitation purposes, all persons with a visual acuity <6/18 to light perception, who still have useful vision, should be labelled “low vision, not blind” so as to encourage the use of vision.

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