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Washington State House of Representatives Approves Eye Care Resolution
New resolution recommends preschool screenings and examinations for amblyopia

On February 16, 2004, the Washington State House of Representatives approved a resolution submitted by the Washington State Children's Vision Coalition (WSCVC) and Representatives Ruth Kagi and Eileen Cody. The resolution strongly recommends that parents in Washington state have their children screened or examined for amblyopia and other vision impairments before entering school.

Amblyopia affects an estimated 160,000 people in Washington state. Vision loss can usually be prevented if amblyopia is caught by screenings or examinations during preschool years.

Amblyopia, often called "lazy eye," is potentially reversible damage in the vision center of the brain resulting in vision loss. It is most commonly caused by uncorrected refractive (focusing) errors and eye misalignment in childhood. Amblyopia is the most common cause of unilateral vision loss in adults.

"Too many vision problems are going undetected in young children," says Karen Preston, O.D., Co-Chair of the Washington State Children's Vision Coalition. "The Coalition's goal is to urge parents to ask, not to assume, that their child receives a vision screening from a pediatrician or other health care provider by six months of age. The Coalition recommends a complete eye examination if the child has a family history of amblyopia or signs of the disorder are present."

The WSCVC is aimed at improving the detection of preventable vision loss in preschool children, specifically from amblyopia. Doctors of optometry, ophthalmology, pediatrics and family practice as well as representatives from the legislature, public health service and school nursing make up the WSCVC.

"I commend the Coalition for successfully building consensus agreement among various types of health care providers on this critical issue," says Representative Ruth Kagi. "While other states are legislating mandatory exams, the Coalition's approach is to use public education to encourage parents to get their children screened and examined."

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The WSCVC feels it is important parents understand the role of screenings versus professional eye examinations. Statistics show that 58% of Americans are not aware of the importance of eye examinations (as opposed to screenings) in detecting and diagnosing pediatric eye conditions.

Vision screenings performed by pediatricians during regular infant check-ups measure for limited distance vision, signs of amblyopia and abnormalities in need of further attention. In comparison, comprehensive eye examinations performed by doctors of optometry or ophthalmology use advanced technology to measure vision at all distances, focusing errors, eye alignment, eye diseases such as cataracts, color recognition and eye-hand coordination.

In addition to regular eye exams, parents and teachers should watch closely for the following signs that may indicate amblyopia is present or may be developing:

- One eye that deviates (causing the eye to misalign)
- Cloudiness in one eye
- Apparent difficulty seeing well

The Optometric Physicians of Washington (OPW) recommends children receive their first eye examination or vision screening at six months of age. Providing there are no impairments that require further immediate testing, a second exam should be performed at age three. Yearly exams should take place in subsequent years, especially for school-aged children whose eyes can become fatigued during school and athletic activities.

See www.eyes.org for more information on amblyopia, its treatment, a copy of the full resolution and information about the OPW's free eye care program, VISION USA.

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