3. Strengthening eye care services through trachoma elimination efforts

The neglected tropical disease (NTD) trachoma remains the leading infectious cause of blindness worldwide. Caused by a bacterium called \textit{Chlamydia trachomatis}, the infection is transmitted through contact with discharge from the eyes and noses of infected people, particularly young children. Disease transmission is typically concentrated among children and family living in crowded households with poor hygiene, inadequate sanitation and a lack of clean water.

With repeated infections, the inside of the eyelid becomes severely scarred (trichiasis), causing it to turn inward and the eyelashes to rub against the eyeball. This results in scarring of the cornea, visual impairment or blindness. Trachoma remains endemic in seven countries in the Western Pacific Region: Australia, Fiji, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Viet Nam.

WHO recommends the SAFE strategy: Surgery, Antibiotics, Facial cleanliness, and Environmental improvement, particularly improved access to water and sanitation. Guided by this strategy, important progress has been made. In 2017, Cambodia and the Lao People’s Democratic Republic became the first countries in the Region to be validated by WHO as having achieved elimination of trachoma as a public health problem. Validation also included an assessment of health system capacity to detect and treat potential patients into the future.

Member States and partners have been working together to strengthen national eye health capacity as a key component of the SAFE strategy. Efforts have included training for ophthalmologic doctors and nurses on eye examination and surgical interventions, and training for the broader health workforce on sustained service provision including access to quality-assured antibiotics and surgical interventions. All endemic countries in the Region continue to strengthen their eye care systems to help achieve elimination of blinding trachoma. Importantly, this strengthening will also produce broader benefits, improving access to ophthalmologic services overall.