

## President's Insights January 2025

### Love in the Time of Cholera

This is the title of a novel by the Colombian Gabriel García Márquez. Cholera is a disease, but in Spanish it also means anger. It serves as a metaphor for the challenges of humanity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In a world increasingly marked by division, the need for international cooperation has never been more pressing. Despite significant differences in culture, ideology, and economic status, humanity faces challenges that transcend borders—climate change, the immigration and refugee crisis, and pandemics are just a few examples. These issues require collective action and a unified approach to ensure a sustainable future for all. The essence of cooperation lies in recognizing our shared humanity, fostering understanding, and working together to overcome the obstacles that threaten our existence.

#### **The Urgency of Collective Action**

Climate change stands as one of the most formidable challenges of our time. Its effects are felt universally, yet responses often remain localized. The World Health Organization (WHO) has underscored the interconnectedness of climate change and health, particularly for vulnerable populations such as migrants and refugees. As climate-related events displace millions, it is imperative that nations collaborate to build resilient health systems that accommodate the needs of these populations. The urgency to collaborate is echoed in forums like the recent Conference of the Parties (COP29) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, where global leaders are called to integrate the health needs of displaced individuals into national plans, emphasizing that "everyone, everywhere, can access the health services they need."

Similarly, the immigration and refugee crisis demands a cooperative global response. With over one billion migrants worldwide, many fleeing conflict or environmental disasters—countries must work together to create inclusive policies that ensure access to essential services. WHO's reports highlight that health is a human right and should be universally available, regardless of one's migratory status. This recognition is vital for fostering social cohesion and stability in host countries while addressing the root causes of migration.

#### **The Role of Eyecare in Global Health**

One specific area where international cooperation is crucial is eye care. Approximately 2.6 billion people suffer from uncorrected refractive errors, significantly impacting their quality of life and economic productivity. The WHO has launched initiatives like SPECS 2030 to tackle this issue through coordinated global action among governments, non-profits, and industry stakeholders. Achieving the ambitious target of increasing access to eye care services requires a multi-faceted approach integrating efforts across sectors. This initiative exemplifies how collective advocacy can substantially improve public health outcomes.

## **Cultural Understanding as a Foundation for Cooperation**

Cultural differences often pose barriers to effective collaboration but can also serve as a foundation for enriching international relations. Understanding diverse cultural perspectives fosters mutual respect and enhances communication among nations. Cultural diplomacy, promoting dialogue and cooperation over competition, is critical in this context. By acknowledging and valuing differences rather than attempting to erase them, countries can build stronger alliances to address global challenges.

As a recent example, when the TikTok platform was about to close, many Americans migrated to the RedNote platform. It was the first time many United States and China citizens had talked directly to each other. Judging from the reactions on both sides, it was an enriching intercultural experience.

Moreover, educational initiatives that promote cultural exchange can help dispel stereotypes and biases that hinder cooperation. Programs designed to facilitate interaction among individuals from different backgrounds can foster empathy and understanding—essential components for collaborative problem-solving in an interconnected world.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, while anger and division may characterize our current global landscape, love—expressed through empathy, understanding, and cooperation—must guide our actions. The challenges we face today are too significant for any nation to tackle alone; they require a collective response rooted in shared values and mutual respect. By embracing our differences and working together across cultural and ideological divides, we can create a more equitable world where everyone can access fundamental rights like health care and education. The path forward lies not in isolation but in unity—a testament to our shared humanity in love during times of anger.

Héctor Santiago, OD, PhD, FAAO  
President VOSH/international  
santiago@vosh.org