

STATEMENT OF HON. JACOB H. GILBERT, A REPRESENTATIVE IN
CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF NEW YORK

Mr. GILBERT. Mr. Chairman, I want to commend this committee for its forward-looking stand in conducting hearings on the proposal to establish a National Eye Institute. I am one of the sponsors of this proposal, my bill being H.R. 4331, but Congressman Fred B. Rooney of Pennsylvania, author of the bill, deserves our particular thanks. This is a progressive measure, one that is worthy of Congress' tradition as a leader in the field of health care and research. All of us here in Congress, depending as heavily as we do on our eyes, understand its meaning. I urge favorable consideration of this bill and the establishment, without delay, of a National Eye Institute.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, we know that by 1975, unless there is a dramatic breakthrough in eye research and treatment, there will be some 16 million blind persons in the world. Even today, in the United States alone, there are three and a half million men, women, and children suffering from permanent and serious eye defects. It is estimated that nearly 90 million Americans suffer from some sort of eye trouble. At this moment, there are more than 10 million in the world who are blind.

It is difficult to believe that with all the effort and money that has been put into medical research, most diseases of the eye remain a mystery to doctors. Eighty percent of all loss of vision in the United States results from diseases of which the causes are unknown. Surely, that alone is testimony to the importance of this legislation.

In economic terms, the burden of eye diseases is staggering, Mr. Chairman. Public assistance is extended to more than 100,000 blind persons. Society pays for special facilities, books, teachers, and materials for no less than 20,000 blind children attending elementary and secondary schools. The upkeep is tremendous for vocational rehabilitation centers and other facilities to restore the productiveness of the blind. I have no figure of how much society pays for this grievous debility but it is enormous, and we, obviously, cannot measure blindness in monetary terms alone.

But, as an example, let me point out to you the story recently brought to my attention of one blinding disease. In 1953 doctors made the discovery that too much oxygen administered to premature infants resulted in retrolental fibroplasia, a cause of blindness. As a result of the discovery, the incidence of this disease fell from 1,900 cases in 1952 to only 28 in 1958. Happily, this terrible condition is today a rarity. But if this discovery had come only a year later, the lifetime cost of care for the additional blind persons would have amounted to more than \$120 million. If the discovery had come 10 years later, the cost would have exceeded \$1 billion.

So you see, Mr. Chairman, you are not being asked to undertake a project that is merely humane, as if humaneness alone were not sufficient reason for passage of the bill. This measure will pay for itself over and over again in the years to come. The National Eye Institute would conduct research on blinding eye diseases, blindness, and other visual defects. Its work will be of benefit not only to the thousands, perhaps millions, who will be saved from blindness. It will be of benefit to society, both at home and abroad.