As a strong advocate for the role that vision plays in the development of children, I feel as though it’s appropriate to highlight the development of the InfantSEE program. The InfantSEE program was designed to offer a no-cost eye examination to infants for the screening, prevention and diagnosis of visual impairments or disease.1-3 The program was launched in 2005 by the American Optometric Association, Johnson and Johnson Vision and former United States president Jimmy Carter.1,4 The InfantSEE program is now managed by Optometry Cares-The AOA Foundation.2 This movement was initiated to promote eye health as part of infant wellness screenings to ensure a better quality of life.1

Optometrists who participate in this volunteer program provide babies six months to one year old with a comprehensive eye examination regardless of their economic status.1 This program also helps to solidify the role of optometrists in healthcare and provide the public with information about the profession.7 As former president Jimmy Carter stated during his public advocacy for the launch of the program, “As parents, we regularly take our children to the dentist to help prevent cavities. Likewise, we should take our babies to the optometrist to help prevent potential eye and vision problems.”4

During the inaugural year, roughly one thousand infants were assessed. An analysis run by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicated that one in eight had a positive ocular or vision related risk factor that warranted follow-up care.5 Over the past 18 years, more than 170,000 assessments have been reported. Of those examinations, more than 14,000 infants were identified with a cause of concern and more than 19,000 had a vision condition identified.7

In 2015, a survey was distributed amongst the alumni of the U.S optometry schools and state optometric association members to quantify the number of providers and infant exams conducted across the country.8 Among the 572 optometrists that participated in the survey, only 81% felt qualified to perform an infant examination, with only 55% of survey participants being registered InfantSEE providers.6

This program has proven to be impactful; however, not many parents are aware of this opportunity and that leaves many children unevaluated. There are roughly 20 million children under five in America and only about 14% have had their eyes examined, which means that about 17 million children have entered school without having their eyes examined.7 The InfantSEE program is the first step in promoting the importance of childhood ocular health screenings and will hopefully pave the way for school entrance screenings for all children before kindergarten.

Across the entire United States, visual disorders are the fourth most common disability.7 According to the National Eye Institute, a visually impaired child is one who needs special educational, vocational or social services into adulthood.9 It is estimated that 2-5% of pre-school children have impaired vision and that it is the most prevalent handicapping condition in children in the United States.7 This goes to show the importance of screening infants as part of their newborn wellness checks and evaluating these children as they approach school age to avoid visual impairments that could hinder or complicate their learning.

REFERENCES