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CONGRESS PASSES BILL TO PROTECT CONSUMERS IN TIME FOR HALLOWEEN

Non-Profit and Eye Care Professional Groups Applaud Passage of Bill Requiring Prescription for Cosmetic Contact Lenses

COLUMBUS – After more than a year of combined efforts from leading volunteer eye health and safety organizations including Prevent Blindness Ohio (PBO), and major eye care professional groups, both the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives have passed legislation that will require consumers to obtain a prescription from a licensed professional to purchase contact lenses. The bill, S. 172, will now be presented to President George W. Bush to be signed into law.

Halloween is right around the corner and the U.S. Census estimated that in 2004 there were 36.4 million “trick-or-treaters”. Older children and teens may be attracted to use the decorative contact lenses that have become popular costume accessories. They can change eye color or even give the appearance of cat’s eyes or reptile eyes. This new legislation now classifies fashion contact lenses, or “plano” lenses, as medical devices, which will require more rigorous safety standards be met.

Fashion contact lenses are becoming a growing problem for teens and young adults as nearly 1,100 eye injuries related to these lenses are treated in U.S. hospital emergency rooms annually. The lenses, which offer no visual correction, are sometimes being illegally sold by non-eye care professionals at corner stores, costume shops, beauty shops and video outlets without an appropriate prescription and fitting.

Prevent Blindness Ohio has long advocated for legislation to end the unnecessary and dangerous risk to consumers by assuring that all contact lenses, including fashion lenses, are regulated by the FDA and have therefore been rigorously examined for safety and effectiveness. Using these lenses without the proper direction from an eye care professional can lead to serious eye complications. These problems include bacterial infections, swelling, eye pain, sensitivity to light, conjunctivitis (pink eye), corneal scratches, corneal ulceration and loss of clarity. If left untreated, these conditions can result in permanent eye damage and loss of sight.

“PBO would like to extend our thanks and appreciation for the outstanding leadership of Ohio’s elected officials in support of this important eye health bill, including Senate bill sponsor, Mike DeWine, Senate bill co-sponsor, George Voinovich and House bill co-sponsors, Michael Oxley, Dennis Kucinich, Patrick Tiberi and Sherrod Brown,” said Sherill K. Williams, president and CEO of PBO. “They have all demonstrated their dedication to protecting the gift of sight through their support of this measure.”

Prevent Blindness America (PBA), the only national, voluntary, not-for-profit health organization dedicated to preventing blindness and preserving sight commends the work of all groups that joined together to promote the legislation, including American Academy of Ophthalmology, the American Optometric Association, the Contact Lens Association of Ophthalmologists and the Contact Lens Institute. PBA developed its own grassroots campaign to urge government representatives to learn more about the issue and vote to protect the vision of their own constituents. Through the “Contact Congress” section on its Web site, phone numbers, mailing and e-mail addresses of legislators were provided to the public, state by state. That effort alone generated hundreds of calls, letters and e-mails from concerned citizens.

Prevent Blindness Ohio offers the following safety tips regarding safe contact lens use:

- Always visit a licensed eye care professional to be fitted for contact lenses.
- Never buy contact lenses without a prescription.
- Always clean and disinfect contact lenses according to instructions.
- Always use water-soluble cosmetics or those labeled safe for use with contact lenses. Do not apply skin creams or moisturizers too close to the eyes.
- Never wear opaque lenses if you have any problems with night vision.
- Never share or trade your contact lenses with friends.
- Be vigilant about older kid's appearance before letting them leave the house. If they are wearing fashion contacts, question them about where they got them.

ABOUT PREVENT BLINDNESS OHIO

Prevent Blindness Ohio, founded in 1957, is the only voluntary, not-for-profit health organization dedicated to preventing blindness and preserving sight. It serves all 88 Ohio counties, providing direct services to more than 600,000 Ohioans annually and educating millions of consumers about what they can do to protect and preserve their precious gift of sight. Prevent Blindness Ohio is an affiliate of Prevent Blindness America, the country's second-oldest national voluntary health organization. For more information or to make a contribution, visit our website at www.pbohio.org or call 800-301-2020.