



Vision for Healthy Ageing

How demographic changes impact the work of Europe's optometrists and opticians

Against the backdrop of demographic change in Europe, and a growing number of citizens suffering from chronic diseases, “healthy ageing” has emerged as a prominent issue on policy agendas at all levels. Initiatives to support the elderly and promote healthy lifestyles abound, however, notably absent is a much-needed focus on eye health and achieving the best possible vision for Europe's population. This is where ECOO and its members, Europe's optometrists and opticians, have an important role to play.

Healthy eyes and good vision are paramount for independent and active living, at all ages. Yet, the role of vision in the wider policy agenda on healthy ageing, at both the national and the EU level, remains limited. It is encouraging to see that vision is included on the agenda that tackles broader challenges, like dementia or falls prevention. This is illustrated by how eye health is included in the Falls Prevention Action Group within the European Innovation Partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing (EIP-AHA).

The EIP-AHA is the European Commission's initiative to boost innovative ways of ensuring that living longer also translates into living as healthily and independently as possible. Aiming to increase the lives of citizens by two years by 2020, the initiative strongly focuses on disease prevention, health promotion, care improvements, and independent living. The EIP-AHA Falls Prevention Group is one component of the initiative, focusing specifically on modern technologies that help monitor falls, enhance early diagnosis, and prevent falls all together.

Through the EIP-AHA Falls Prevention Action group, the European Coalition for Vision (ECV), of which ECOO is a member, works together with other organisations across Europe to influence policy and to raise awareness about the close connection between falls and eye health. A key objective is to have the link between eye health, vision and falls recognised through local and national guidelines. After all, healthy eyes that provide the best possible vision are themselves a falls prevention mechanism. According to data from the European Public Health Association, around 36,000 older European citizens each year are fatally injured after they fall. This number can be reduced by ensuring that as many people as possible have good eye sight. We know that there remain older people who are living with visual impairment due to uncorrected refractive error or eye disease, much of which could be remedied, treated or prevented by ensuring the best possible eye health provision across the EU.

When it comes to dementia, optometrists have an important role to play in recognising symptoms. Training programmes to help optometrists develop these skills could be further developed. The College of Optometrists recently published findings from the [PrOVIDe](#) (Prevalence of Visual Impairment in Dementia) Study, which was completed in 2016, and which indicate that many cases of dementia show visual symptoms, especially as patients live longer. The findings also show that 32.5% of people with dementia studied had a visual acuity (VA) worse than 6/12, which is the legal standard for driving.

16.3% & had a VA worse than 6/18. Much of the uncorrected VI identified in the PrOVIDe study was from refractive error or cataracts – both of which can be treated in the majority of cases.

Opticians are especially pivotal in offering rehabilitation support to low vision patients. This support ranges from improving the citizen's optical functions to support that contributes to the quality of life and independence of those who have suffered reduced vision due to illness or injury. Training and increased awareness could help opticians in getting better equipped to respond to the needs of the visually impaired in an ageing society. Both optometrists and opticians could also think of adjusting the set-up of their practice, in order to make it more accessible to those people that live with dementia, the elderly and more frail individuals living with a disability or multiple co-morbidities.

Through the on-going engagement with policy-makers and other organisations in Brussels, ECOO raises awareness of the importance of timely eye screening. Not only for people with diabetes and dementia, but for young people as well, to support the objective of healthy ageing throughout the lifecycle.