



Europe's optometrists and opticians in an increasingly digital landscape

The digital revolution is profoundly changing our lives, and technological advancements continue to impact every market sector and profession - the optometry and optics fields no less. At the same time, citizens increasingly move from one country to the other and they expect to receive personal and tailored healthcare services wherever they go. In this landscape, the expertise of eye care professionals remains crucial in ensuring patient eye health, exciting new technologies and ubiquitous connectedness notwithstanding.

Optometrists and opticians are confronted with two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, digital tools are advancing the way they do their work. Modern techniques, like digital retinal imaging or Optical Coherence Tomography (OCT) scans, allow for more timely diagnosis of eye diseases through less invasive and less painful eye exams.

Furthermore, technology changes the way eye professionals communicate with patients and colleagues and it may only be a matter of time before robots and artificial intelligence enter their daily practice. Digital infrastructures make it easier to consult with patients from a distance, and they offer innovative methods for information exchange and greater access to resources and data.

But these innovations come with a flip side. There is a growing trend of self-diagnosis and self-treatment, based on information available on the Internet. The emerging online market for optical products is further contributing to this trend. In addition, more and more people spend a large part of their day looking at the screens of their digital devices, at home, at work, and on the move. This leads to a higher prevalence of digital eye strain.

Eye health professionals are thus dealing with “new” types of diseases, and find that they have a key role to play in raising awareness of how digital devices can impact vision. Digital infrastructures can be a useful solution for optometrists and opticians in this regard. Through electronic health records and automatic reminders of when a next eye examination is due, they can encourage people to make visiting an optometrist or optician part of their normal healthcare routine.

However, fully availing of these opportunities requires a level of digital health literacy from professionals and patients alike. For primary eye care to stay accessible and inclusive, and to ensure that digital eye health solutions contribute to the sustainability of health systems in the long run, healthcare professionals and patients need to be equipped with the right set of skills. This implies investment in digital training opportunities.

The European Commission is increasingly engaged on digital health. Against the backdrop of higher mobility within the European Union and the changes brought about by technology and connectedness, the European Commission will soon present new rules to ensure that citizens have access to their own (electronic) health records and that they can share their personal data electronically. This action represents the first time the European Commission is actively looking into health on the Digital Single Market.

While Europe's optometrists and opticians are adapting to a changing world, they remain a first port of call for people who suspect problems with their eye sight. On their behalf, the European Council of Optometry and Optics (ECOO) continues to engage with the European Commission on activities in the field of health and technology, skills and professional qualifications.