



ECOO NEWSLETTER

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MESSAGE FROM MASSIMO REVELLI, ECOO PRESIDENT



“Lockdown” has been [one of the most used words of 2020](#). We have felt it on a personal and professional level, with measures put in place to prevent a rise in COVID-19 infections affecting the delivery of eye care services across Europe.

Throughout the year, we have been surveying our members to understand the extent to which their activity has been affected. With our last survey, conducted at the beginning of the Autumn, we’ve seen that when new lockdown measures have been introduced, practices in the majority of countries were able to either carry out emergency services only or stayed open because the government considered them to be essential services.

The pandemic has had an impact on patient-facing work: 30% of respondents reported a significant decline and 46% reported a moderate decline in patient-facing work, due to the measures put in place in order to limit the spread of the virus (time between appointments, disinfecting procedures or general reduction of foot traffic in the practice). The main challenges that opticians/optometrists face now are the “no-shows” to appointments, seeing less patients due to safety measures, the use of digital solutions to bridge the face-to-face challenges.

On a positive note, with COVID-19, there was a recognition that our professions could contribute to taking some of the pressure off health systems and ensure continuity of eye care. Most members believed they have been able to demonstrate value by acting as a first point of contact for patients and they also felt that there was more awareness about the role of optometrists and opticians.

At ECOO, we will continue to gather information about the impact of COVID-19 on our members and on the provision of eye care, especially now that a second wave has come, and some epidemiologists are even thinking of a possible third wave. We hope that the vaccine distribution will be the real start of the pandemic slowing down and ending.

We will relay the information gathered at EU level and highlight the value of a well-educated and skilled workforce that can ensure timely diagnosis of eye conditions and access to care.

2020 has also been a year of change, with a new Executive Team at ECOO and a new European Qualifications Board to further our work on education – I will let you discover more in the present newsletter, but I would like to conclude by thanking all ECOO members for their continued commitment to our shared vision.

We look forward to resuming our face-to-face meetings when it is safe to do so and in the meantime, I wish you all the best for the festive days!

Massimo Revelli

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ECOO UPDATES

New ECOO Executive Committee and European Board of Qualifications

Following elections held during the General Assembly in October 2020, the European Council of Optometry and Optics has a new Executive Committee and a new Board advancing our work on European Qualifications in optometry and optics.

Over the next two years, [the new Executive Committee](#) will represent the professions at EU level and will drive the association's work on developing the scope of practice for optometrists and opticians to the degree that the same high standards apply and are mutually recognised in all European countries.

Taking over the presidency from Dr. Cindy Tromans, Mr Massimo Revelli said: "I look forward to working closely with the rest of the Executive Committee to deliver on our members' expectations, supporting them in the development of the professions at national level and keeping them abreast of developments that are likely to impact their day-to-day activities. We will be continuing our efforts to raise the profile of vision on the health policy agenda, collaborating with partners along the way, and taking further the recommendations of the WHO report on vision". Mr Massimo Revelli [discussed](#) this and more with our member, the Association of Optometrists Ireland, in a brand new podcast.

The [European Qualifications Board](#) will support the development of educational standards of opticians and optometrists across Europe, playing an integral part of ECOO's mission to harmonise the educational and professional systems across Europe.

Chair of the European Qualifications Board, Dr Julie-Anne Little, said: "We are thrilled to see more and more students take a strong interest in the European Diploma in Optometry and the European Qualifications in Optics. With a new focus from the European institutions in investing in new skills and training programmes, we see new opportunities to take our work to the next level and embed it within national qualification frameworks". The strides made on this important workstream are the result of pioneering efforts led by Dr Robert Chappell, whose particular interest in the international mutual recognition of qualifications to facilitate the free global movement of professionals has been at the heart of developing the European Diploma in Optometry and the ongoing work to recognise prior learning and achievement in Europe.

Launch of new ECOO Blue Book 2020



The 4th edition of the ECOO Blue Book was launched on World Sight Day 2020. The Blue Book contains data on the number and size of the profession of optometry and optics in each country, the status, and scope of practice of the profession, its role in public health, and the education and training provided. To date, it remains the only freely available resource providing comparative data on these professional groups in Europe.

Don't hesitate to browse through the [new edition](#)! Share facts about your own country using #ECOOBlueBook on Twitter and LinkedIn, or [retweet](#) to spread the word!

ON THE EU AGENDA

European Health Union

The European Commission is building a strong [European Health Union](#), in which all EU countries prepare and respond together to health crises, medical supplies are available, affordable and innovative, and countries work together to improve prevention, treatment and aftercare for diseases such as cancer. The European Health Union will better protect the health of citizen, equip the EU and its Member States to better prevent and address future pandemics improve resilience of Europe's health systems. One of the key building blocks in ensuring the capacity of health systems to deliver health services and meet the changing demands of care is the availability of a workforce with the right skills and flexibility.

European Health Data Space

One of the priorities of the Von der Leyen Commission is the creation of a [European Health Data Space](#) (EHDS), which will promote better exchange and access to different types of health data such as electronic health records. Among others, this will support healthcare delivery but also health policy making purposes. "Data quality" and "interoperability" will play a key factor in the success of this initiative, as it is essential to ensure health data quality and that the various sources of health data are able to "communicate" with each other: using the same IT systems but also, to some degree, harmonising standards and measurements (e.g. for measuring visual acuity). As part of the eHealth stakeholder group, ECOO will have the opportunity to provide input with regards to the implementation of the EHDS from a patient and practitioner point of view.

A life course of healthy vision

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. Mid-December, the European Council of Optometry and Optics (ECOO), the Global Coalition on Aging (GCOA), and the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB) convened a small group of experts from the fields of vision and ageing will aim to set priorities and strategies for engagement with key European governments and the European Commission. As part of the eye care workforce, optometrists and opticians are often the first point of contact when vision related issues occur and see patients from across all ages – from children to adults and elderly patients. The conversation around adopting a life-course approach to healthy vision is more important than ever, as we build back from the COVID-19 situation where patients have been missing out on eye care.

Medical Devices Regulation

With 6 months to go until the date of application of the Medical Devices Regulation (26 May 2021), discussions on the implementation of the new framework are still ongoing. ECOO continues to closely follow the key questions that remain to be clarified and provides input on relevant issues. This includes the classification of spectacles under the MDR or the workability of the EUDAMED database. ECOO also attends all relevant MDCG (Medical Devices Coordination Group) meetings, which are now being organised remotely.

COUNTRY UPDATES



Belgium sees a successful national awareness campaign on vision, but still faces challenges around the implementation of the Royal Decree governing the profession

By Viviane de Vries, Belgium, APOOB

More than 240 opticians in Belgium took part in the [16th edition of the Vision Week](#), making it a successful national awareness campaign on the importance of vision. According to a survey issued by the APOOB, the majority of Belgians have not had their vision checked by an optician or optometrist in the past five years. During the week-long campaign, the population was encouraged to book a free appointment with the participating practitioners, generating interest from national press and appearing 21 times in articles online.

Our Covid-19 survey after the first wave confirmed that more than 70% of our members found that work by appointment is feasible and that 50% of our members would like to continue working in this way, even after the COVID period. More than 90% of our members say that customers feel safe in this new situation.

Another development relates to the Royal Decree on the paramedical profession of Orthoptist-Optometrist which entered in force on 22 April 2019, which remains challenging. To date, no bachelor's degree (180 ECTS, as described in the AR) has been recognised in the Wallonia-Brussels region, even after a year and a half, which raises serious questions about the implementation of the Royal Decree by 21 April 2023. With the end of the regularisation procedure approaching, as a professional association we are concerned about the current stalemate.



Switzerland goes optometry!

By OptikSchweiz

With the entry into force of the Federal Act on Health Professions (GesBG) on February 1, 2020, optometry is the new and upcoming standard in ophthalmic optics care in Switzerland. All 26 states of the confederation – each with their independent health legislation – have introduced nationwide uniform regulations for seven non-medical professions that are considered health-related: in addition to nursing, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, midwifery, nutrition/dietetics and osteopathy, optometry is also included.

The GesBG aims to promote the quality of the healthcare system without increasing its costs. In the long run, regarding optometry, this means: relief for ophthalmology through comprehensive screening (delivery of visual aids only after optometric control), taking over minor examinations and the reduction of false-positive referrals. In addition to this, however, all professions of the GesBG will not be able to prescribe compulsory benefits from the mandatory basic health insurance. This means that this cost driver of the health care system will not be burdened further.

On the one hand, the act regulates the training of professions at Bachelor's level, on the other hand it regulates the general as well as the respective subject-specific expertise. The package also includes further defined professional obligations. In particular, these include the obligation to perform only those activities for which one has acquired recognized expertise, as well as the obligation of lifelong learning. Transitional provisions concerning previous professional titles and existing permits are also regulated: these remain in full force. What is new for professionals under previous laws is that they too must keep their professional skills up to date.

The Optometrist BSc FHNW – the full title of the Swiss qualification – was introduced in 2007 and replaced the previous higher professional diploma in ophthalmic optics, which entitles the holder to prescribe corrective lenses and to fit contact lenses in the cantons. Health-relevant aspects were already part of the training in the past – in the three-year optometry degree program, the relevant skills are taught systematically and with great practical relevance. The skills profile of Optometrists BSc FHNW also includes the use of diagnostics. However, the corresponding medications are not yet available, because the jurisdiction in the Therapeutic Products Act has to be adapted – this will probably be the case starting in 2021.

Optometrists are still a minority among professionals. So it will take years before the new standard becomes established in practice. By means of CAS diagnostics, previous professional diploma holders who have also completed academic further education (MSc, MAS, OD) can obtain full equivalence to the Optometrist BSc FHNW. Further postgraduate degree programs for earlier professional qualifications are being planned. The Swiss Red Cross SRC is responsible for the recognition of foreign educational qualifications: anyone who wants to work in the field of optometry as of February 1, 2020, needs an education that is equivalent to the Optometrist BSc FHNW (contents, number of hours, internships). Deviations can be compensated with compensation measures like courses, exams or internships.

In the Swiss system, optometrists are not only health professionals under federal law, but also under the respective cantonal law, which can have quite different consequences in practice. The basic obligations and skills of optometry are regulated on a national level, but there may also be regulations regarding business and infrastructure or legal regulations at the level of optics: the spectrum ranges from very liberal to highly regulatory cantons.

UPDATE FROM THE WORLD COUNCIL OF OPTOMETRY

Looking towards 2021

By Paul Folkesson, WCO President

While 2020 has posed many challenges, the World Council of Optometry (WCO) has remained committed to enhancing optometry globally and promoting the best patient care. We have built and debuted a new [website](#) improving our information about [committee projects and objectives](#); the [COVID-19 news page](#); the [event calendar](#) and [eye care observances](#); the [advocacy page](#) with helpful resources and more!

Other improvements include the launching of a new membership system to better serve our members, and the drafting of a Legislation, Registration, and Standards (LRS) Toolkit which will benefit countries that are in need of assistance as optometry becomes more established. The LRS Toolkit will launch in in early 2021.

While the pandemic prevented WCO from having face-to-face meetings and discussions, WCO was able to pivot to hold their annual Board meeting and General Assembly online. WCO is very proud of the work that has been accomplished by our members, committees, regions, partners, and supporters. To read more about our accomplishments over the past year, [click here](#).

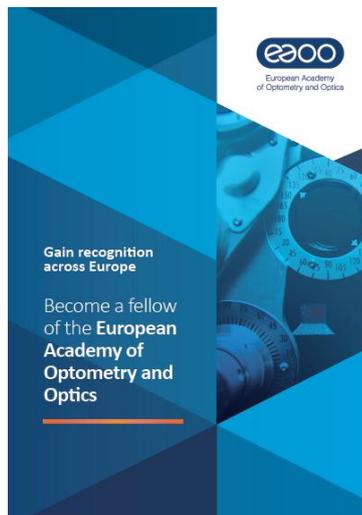
In 2021, we look forward to continuing to advance optometry, assist our members and create online opportunities for engagement. We look forward to holding a Leadership Course dedicated to developing optometric leaders to facilitate the development of optometry around the globe; developing an expanded scope of practice survey; launching the LRS Toolkit and launching the Paediatric Toolkit. In addition, WCO will continue to support initiatives outlined in the World Health Organization (WHO)'s World Report on Vision and will continue to support universal health coverage. WCO will be developing webinars for our members, creating online opportunities for our members to network, and will be launching a members-only portal on our website.

We look forward to a productive 2021 and wish you a wonderful holiday season and a happy new year!

UPDATE FROM THE EUROPEAN ACADEMY

With this year's annual conference having to take a leap forward to April 2021, we were pleased to see many of our members take part in a series of online discussion groups on education, primary eye care, optics and myopia.

We look forward to reconvening for [EAOO Helsinki2021](#), which will take place in the Finnish capital on 23-25 April 2021. A top-quality three-day congress includes keynotes, various other lectures, poster presentations and professional exhibitions. The programme is in English and for the first time in the EAOO's history, lectures will also be streamed online!



We would also like to announce that the 2021 EAOO Fellowship Programme is open, with the deadline for applications being 2 January 2021.

The European Academy of Optometry and Optics (EAOO) developed its Fellowship Programme as a mark of achievement to which all Academy members can aspire. Fellowship is held in high-esteem and is widely accessible to applicants who have made a significant contribution to optometry, optics or vision science at a local, national and/or international level. The Academy's Fellowship application process is by a portfolio of evidence to demonstrate achievements. It is intended to be supportive and enable Academy members from diverse backgrounds to aim for recognition by their peers. The portfolio may reflect past and/or current roles and activities.

Discover the fellowship categories and find out more about how to apply, [here](#).

ECOO upcoming meetings

The ECOO Spring Assembly will take place online and ECOO members will receive all the details in due course.

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