

70th session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe (RC70)

Agenda Item: European Programme of Work (2020–2025) – “United Action for Better Health in Europe”

Accelerating action on vision will have significant and immediate benefits to better health in Europe. Today, over 2.2 billion people have a vision impairment and of these, at least 1 billion have a vision impairment that could have been prevented or is yet to be addressed. In Europe, there are an estimated 30 million people who live with visual impairment, including 2.7 million people who are blind.

Vision loss poses considerable challenges for individuals, communities and health systems; increasing the risk of accidents, injuries and depression, and resulting in considerable health and social costs. The burden of vision loss also falls unequally on poorer countries and underserved populations including people in rural areas, those with low incomes, women, older people, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities and indigenous populations.

Without concerted action, by 2050 three times as many people will be blind as now, and half the world will be living with short sightedness.

But this is not inevitable. The majority of vision loss is preventable or treatable. Simple and highly cost-effective interventions exist for the two leading causes of blindness and vision impairment; cataract and uncorrected refractive error.

Accelerating action on vision is a simple and highly cost-effective means of unlocking human potential; enabling children to gain an education, working age adults to get and keep a job; and improving equality for women and girls, who are more likely to suffer poor vision and less likely to get treatment. It also helps sustain mental health and contributes to health targets on neglected tropical disease, financial protection and health workforce.

In August of this year, Member States adopted a landmark World Health Assembly resolution on ‘Integrated People Centred Eye Care’, requiring all countries to strengthen eye care within and across their health systems. With this resolution the international community is saying loud and clear that citizens will not be left behind because of lack of access to vision care.

The resolution was co-sponsored by all of the Member States of the European Union and the United Kingdom. On behalf of the global eye care sector, we would like to commend the leadership of European countries on the issue of eye health. Your recognition of the importance of this issue and your commitment to advance eye health will lead to improvements in both the awareness and delivery of eye care in Europe and across the world. We look forward to working with European countries on next phase of the implementation of the resolution and the recommendations of World Health Organization’s World Report on Vision.



We appreciate that the resolution comes at a time when health systems across the world are facing unprecedented challenges. The eye care sector, like many other areas of health, is facing a backlog of patients following the suspension of services to combat the spread of the coronavirus; and there is an increasing concern about the irreversible progression of eye diseases.

IAPB and the global eye care sector stand ready to work with European countries and the World Health Organization on the recommencement of eye care services and their integration as a core part of Universal Health Coverage and resilient national health care systems.