



EUROPEAN COALITION FOR VISION
Better Eye Health For Europe

European Coalition for Vision
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Dear MEP

Happy New Year 2021! Let us hope we shall get close to seeing an end to the dreadful COVID-19 pandemic through infection prevention and control, public education and the arrival of new vaccines.

I am writing both to mark the turning of the year and also to thank you for supporting our awareness raising efforts about eye health and visual impairment during 2020 – the Year of Vision, despite all the competing disruptions.

When I wrote to you on last 1 January, I explained that the ECV would publicize new data at key points during the year culminating in World Sight Day 8 October and a dedicated symposium at the 16th World Public Health Congress (virtual via Rome) on 16 October. I am pleased to say that we delivered on all these commitments despite the difficulties presented by COVID-19.

We publicised new prevalence data on eye disease published in Lancet Global Health on 1 December...

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[https://authors.elsevier.com/sd/article/S2214-109X\(20\)30489-7](https://authors.elsevier.com/sd/article/S2214-109X(20)30489-7)

...which show that 21.2 million (95% CI: 19.9-23.4) people in Western and Central Europe are blind, severely or moderately vision impaired and that 77% of this burden is due to preventable causes (uncorrected refractive error, cataract and diabetic retinopathy).

These alarming figures further support the World Health Assembly resolution, proposed by the International Association for the Prevention of Blindness, to implement within national health systems the recommendations of the WHO World Report on Vision for people-centred eye care which assures a continuum of promotive, preventive, treatment and rehabilitative interventions against the spectrum of eye conditions.

We also highlighted the findings of the EUROVISION research project, generously sponsored by a European Commission Marie Curie Fellowship and using EUROSTAT data, which found significant levels of self-reported visual impairment (3% of those aged 15 years and older report having severe difficulty or being unable to see even if wearing

glasses or contact lens correction, rising in older age groups to 17% among those aged 85+ years). The EUROVISION project showed that depression and social isolation were significantly associated with vision impairment and women were more likely to report vision impairment, which begs a number of questions about access to information and care.

COVID-19 has of course changed everything for everyone this year. However, if anything, it has demonstrated how important eye health and vision are for all citizens – from those who are isolated, in lock-down, or lonely to health care staff and key workers who have kept the economies, distribution and health systems operating.

Historically, across Europe, we have compared eye health and vision inequalities between countries but COVID-19 and the most recent data show that we now need to turn that focus inwards within our own countries where major inequalities remain in

- access to information about eye health, risk, self-care and preventing blindness
- access to person-centred services
- eye health outcomes and avoidance of visual impairment linked to age, social status, other long-term conditions, and ethnicity
- access to appropriate support for those who are visually impaired.

Public health specialists who attended our symposium at the Global Congress on 16 October agreed via a poll that

- not everyone in their countries had access to affordable personalized eye care
- eye health was not well understood or well addressed by the public health community, health services and governments
- the populations were not well informed about eye health risks including familial risk, ethnicity, smoking and diabetes
- eye health and prevention of visual impairment have higher public health and policy priority (especially given the rising levels of avoidable visual impairment linked to ageing and short-sightedness in young people)
- education, transport and employment systems in their countries did not yet sufficiently support people with visual impairment to participate fully in society and earn a living.

It will come as no surprise therefore that, as the European Coalition for Vision, we plan to focus our efforts for the next decade on supporting action within Member States and partner countries under the umbrella of the EU to address these inequalities under the banner of #Equal-eyes 2030.

Despite your many other priorities, we very much hope we shall once again be able to count on your support as too many European citizens are still losing their sight unnecessarily and people who have lost their sight are not always as well supported as they might be.

In particular we will be asking you to support our social media campaign again on World Sight Day 14 October 2021 with a tweet, 'like' or an eye health related photo or other image.

I will write to you again about this nearer the time.

In the meantime, the entire European Coalition for Vision wishes you a very Happy (and safer) New Year 2021.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David". The letter 'D' is large and loops around the start of the name.

David Hewlett
President
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