

EYE ON ACTIVE AGEING

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Contents

Blind Europeans divided by living standards, united by obstacles.... p.1
Europe blind to eyecare policy p.2
L'Europe ferme les yeux sur la politique des soins oculaires p.3
Sharp contrast in jobless levels for Europe's blind p.4

Blind rights activist:
'In the UK, 66% of visually impaired are unemployed' p.5
Germany eyes implants for ageing population..... p.7
French move to create new eye professionals p.8

Blind Europeans divided by living standards, united by obstacles

Research shows that living standards for the blind vary considerably across the European Union, but a uniformly ageing demographic and the challenges of modern technology afflict all people with visual impairments in the same way.

Fred Reid, former president of the UK's National Federation of the Blind and Partially Sighted, told EurActiv in an interview that in Romania high unemployment amongst the visually impaired compounds poverty.

"In some cases in the countryside, Romanian parents are unwilling to allow their blind children to enter the job market, preferring to reserve them for work in the fields," Reid said.

In a report called "the Hidden Majority", which he is co-writing, Reid cites the president of a local Romanian blind association describing near third-world conditions for the blind.



By contrast, Scandinavia has a long tradition of pioneering policies for its visually impaired community. In Denmark, a public advisory and support system is backed up with public funding for basic equipment such as guide dogs and canes.

A well-organised lobbying effort has recently secured the reading out loud of subtitles on Danish television. If someone is speaking in a foreign language in a news programme or drama and they are subtitled, the blind are left momentarily baffled.

"But now this is something the biggest Danish broadcaster provides via a button on your remote control. This is something we are proud of," says Thorkild Olesen, chairman of the Danish Association of the Blind.

Behind the statistics the picture is blurred

Whilst Scandinavia appears ahead of the crowd on policy for the blind, a look behind the statistics can reveal a more nuanced situation.

In Sweden, which has one of Europe's highest levels of employment for the visually impaired, only 13% work full time, Reid's research shows.

Some say Swedish employers are under considerable statutory constraint not to dismiss workers going blind, and therefore usher them towards part-time work, Reid said.

"Others disagree, and say that those workers would prefer to be part time. Modern employment conditions for blind people can be very difficult, and travel can be a huge strain. So part-time employment might be a rational solution in those circumstances and I do not know which of these two opposing views is true," Reid told EurActiv.

Olesen puts it plainly: "You can compare statistics with bikinis: they show the most, but hide the most important stuff."

Not comparing like with like is dangerous

Continued on Page 2

Continued from Page 1

“If you compare the blind people’s conditions in Denmark to the rest of the society with other countries’ blind people’s conditions up against their societies, then Denmark probably wouldn’t fare well, overall,” argued Olesen.

He acknowledged that – seen from the standpoint of basic standard of living – the Danish blind have a better deal.

“An early retirement pension is probably worth a lot more than one in Romania. But if you compare how we live to other people in Denmark then we are in a whole different situation. It’s like comparing apples and pears. It depends on the starting point and the comparison,” he explained.

Common challenges threaten blind everywhere

Moreover, two issues affect the visually impaired wherever they are living in Europe: the fact that they are increasingly common, as a result of the ageing demographic across the continent; and the technological revolution.

Technology undoubtedly offers opportunities for the blind, from surgical technologies that may postpone deteriorating eyesight, to the type of button-touch modifications that allow Danes to hear subtitles read to them whilst watching television.

The aged find technology difficult to navigate however, and this problem is

exacerbated by blindness.

“I have a machine which can read out loud certain web pages, but many of our members don’t know how to use a machine like that. You can easily get this machine, but it’s difficult to get someone to teach you how to use it,” Olesen said.

“Most blind people in Denmark are over 70 years old and were able so see for the most part of their lives. For them it’s really difficult to get used to how things now work. They have to start all over,” Olesen said.

Technology radically adapting existing products

Technological advances are also modifying existing goods and products in ways which provide daily challenges for the blind.

Text-to-speech software can be used to ‘read’ digital files or text, or for an accessible eBook reader to hear a synthesised voice read books, and there are digital devices available that produce ‘refreshable’ Braille on a Braille keypad.

Only a small fraction of websites are fully accessible to blind and partially sighted people, however, and only 5% of books are produced in formats, whether electronic or physical - like paper large-print books - which can be read by blind people or the machines they use.

Copyright exemption for the blind out of sight

In a meeting to mark World Sight Day in the European Parliament last week (10 October), Peter Ackland, the chief executive of the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness, warned that as the population of Europe ages so the prevalence of visual impairment will rise.

According to Eurostat statistics, by 2050 the proportion of people aged 65 years or more will increase from 17.6% of the population, to 29.9%.

Ageing Europe losing sight

A special treaty under discussion in the World Intellectual Property Organization would oblige organisations like the Royal National Institute of Blind People in the United Kingdom, to share scarce accessible books with other countries.

There has been much resistance to efforts to agree the treaty, however, with many countries afraid of allowing for exceptions of any kind to copyright laws.

And emerging technologies bring their own new challenges too.

Electric cars, for instance, may be an indispensable ingredient for reducing carbon dioxide emissions, but they pose a threat to the blind, since they are virtually impossible to detect audibly. A campaign launched by the NGO the European Blind Union this week has called for acoustic devices to be attached to electric cars.

These examples illustrate the danger that the visually impaired may be left behind or omitted from technological advancement.

Colin Farmer, an innocent blind man, was shot in the back with a 50,000-volt Taser by British police earlier this month after they mistook his white stick for a samurai sword.

“The Taser hit me in the back and it started sending all these thousands of volts through me and I was terrified,” said Farmer.

It was a graphic warning that – without conscious efforts to incorporate the visually impaired within a fast-changing society – they are in danger of becoming invisible to those in decision making positions.

The number of diabetics is set to increase to 35 million by 2030, of whom up to 40% have undiagnosed retinopathy and 3% will go on to have serious visual impairment.

“Preventable blindness has a huge impact on healthcare systems and society as a whole. Approximately one European in 30 experiences sight loss and 75% of partially sighted persons of working age are unemployed,” MEP Ioannis Tsoukalas

Continued on Page 3

Europe blind to eyecare policy

MEPs have called for urgent measures to increase eyecare, as Europe’s aging population and an uptick in chronic diseases threatens a rapid increase in the numbers suffering from impaired vision.

Continued from Page 2

(European People's Party; Greece) told the meeting.

This burden is likely to grow due to the ageing population, the growth of age-related chronic diseases, and the devastating health complications chronic diseases create, Tsoukalas said.

The main causes of preventable blindness in Europe are age-related macular degeneration, cataract, diabetic retinopathy and glaucoma.

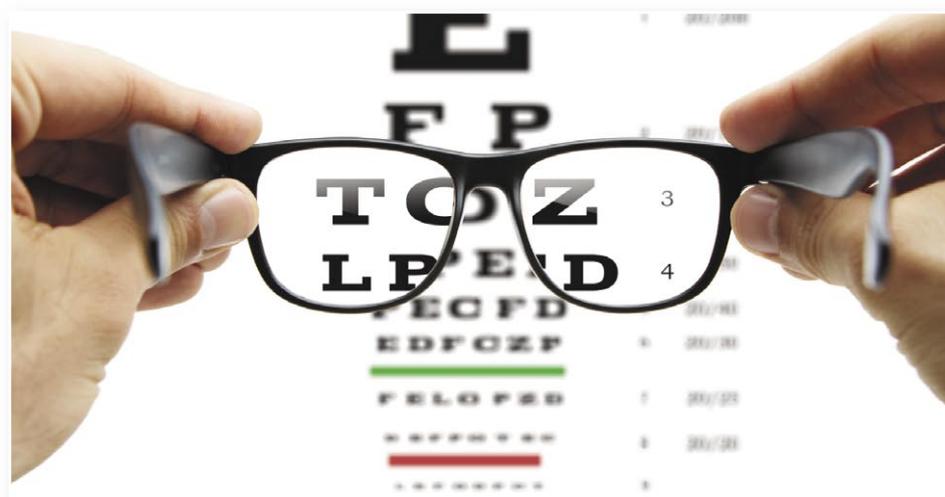
Because it is a complication of other diseases or health problems, it can be prevented if caught at early stages.

Screening, testing needed to prevent blindness

The Greek MEP said that 50% of blindness in Europe is avoidable through preventive treatment such as appropriate eye testing and subsequent treatment.

“Timely prevention is therefore possible and it is critical to reduce the growing burden of blindness,” he added, claiming that the cost of blindness – including non-medical costs such as home adaptation or the requirement of assistance with daily tasks, amounted to around €11,500 per patient per year.

Irish Independent MEP Marian Harkin joined him in calling for adequate



and systematic screening for blindness at national level and more cooperation and adequate referral process between healthcare disciplines.

Meanwhile a survey published simultaneously by the European Forum Against Blindness (EFAB), revealed that more than half of Europeans (53%) fear vision loss and blindness in the coming years and decades.

The more than 5,000 people polled across in five member states said they feared losing their eyesight second only to memory loss, and twice as much as other conditions such as diabetes.

Call to action in the pipeline

Ackland told the meeting that a

range of preventative policies needed to be implemented including public eye health messages, regular sight tests, and the encouragement of exercise.

He also said that vision health remains neglected at European level, as witnessed by the fact that only three European states have adopted “Vision 2020” strategies.

The World Health Organisation and the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness established the global public health initiative, Vision 2020: The Right to Sight, to encourage and promote the development of national eye care plans in 1999.

Based on the outcome of the Parliamentary event, EFAB aims to develop a call to action and building a solid and sustainable coalition against blindness.

L'Europe ferme les yeux sur la politique des soins oculaires

Les eurodéputés ont appelé à prendre des mesures urgentes pour améliorer les soins oculaires. Le vieillissement de la population européenne et l'accroissement du nombre de maladies

chroniques menace de causer une augmentation rapide du nombre de personnes souffrant de problèmes de vue.

Lors d'une réunion au Parlement européen la semaine dernière (10 octobre) pour célébrer la Journée mondiale de la vue, Peter Ackland, le directeur général de l'Agence internationale pour la prévention de la cécité, a signalé qu'étant donné que la population européenne vieillissait, les troubles de la vue étaient plus fréquents.

Selon les statistiques d'Eurostat, la proportion de personnes de plus de 65 ans passera de 17,6 % à 29,9 % de la population d'ici 2050.

L'Europe prend de l'âge et perd la vue

Le nombre de personnes atteintes de diabète augmenterait à 35 millions d'ici 2030. Parmi eux, 40 % souffriront d'une rétinopathie non détectée et 3 % de graves troubles de la vue.

« La cécité évitable a d'énormes conséquences sur les systèmes de soins de santé et sur l'ensemble de la société. Environ un Européen sur 30 connaît une perte de la vue et 75 % des personnes partiellement malvoyantes en âge de travailler sont au chômage », a déclaré l'eurodéputé grec

Continued on Page 4

Continued from Page 3

Ioannis Tsoukalas (PPE) pendant la réunion.

Ce phénomène s'accroît sans doute en raison du vieillissement de la population, de l'augmentation du nombre de maladies chroniques liées à l'âge et des complications de santé désastreuses engendrées par des maladies chroniques, a-t-il ajouté.

Les raisons principales de la cécité évitable en Europe proviennent de la dégénération maculaire liée à l'âge, la cataracte, la rétinopathie diabétique et des glaucomes.

Puisqu'il s'agit d'une complication résultant d'autres maladies ou de problèmes de santé, on peut prévenir la cécité évitable si elle est découverte à un stade précoce.

Dépistages et examens indispensables pour prévenir la cécité

L'eurodéputé grec a expliqué que la moitié de la cécité en Europe pourrait être évitée grâce à un traitement préventif comme un examen de la vue approprié et un traitement a posteriori.

« Il est donc possible de prévenir à temps et il est important de réduire le fardeau grandissant de la cécité », a-t-il ajouté en affirmant que les coûts liés à la cécité (notamment des frais non médicaux tels que l'adaptation du domicile ou la nécessité de recourir à une assistance quotidienne) représentent environ 11 500 € par patient et par an.

Marian Harkin, eurodéputée indépendante irlandaise, a rejoint son appel en demandant d'organiser à l'échelle nationale des dépistages adéquats et systématiques de la cécité ainsi qu'une procédure d'évaluation adéquate entre les branches des soins de santé.

Dans le même temps, une enquête publiée en même temps que l'European Forum Against Blindness (EFAB) a révélé que plus de la moitié des participants (53 %) ont déclaré s'inquiéter de voir moins bien ou de devenir aveugles dans les prochaines années et décennies.

Selon l'enquête menée auprès de plus de 5 000 personnes à travers cinq pays de l'UE, les personnes interrogées craignent plus de perdre la mémoire que la vue et elles

sont deux fois plus nombreuses que celles préoccupées par d'autres troubles comme le diabète.

Demande d'actions en attente

Pendant la réunion, Peter Ackland a annoncé une série de mesures préventives à mettre en oeuvre, dont des messages de santé publique sur les yeux, des tests de la vue réguliers et l'incitation à faire de l'exercice.

Il a ajouté que la santé oculaire restait négligée à l'échelle européenne. L'adoption par seulement trois pays européens des stratégies « Vision 2020 » confirme ces propos.

L'Organisation mondiale de la santé et l'Agence internationale pour la prévention de la cécité ont créé une initiative mondiale sur la santé publique, Vision 2020 : Le Droit à la vue pour encourager et promouvoir le développement des programmes de soins oculaires dès 1999.

Sur la base des résultats de l'événement au Parlement, l'EFAB voudrait développer un appel à agir et à construire une coalition solide et durable contre la cécité.

Sharp contrast in jobless levels for Europe's blind

Unemployment rates amongst the visually impaired in Europe are highest in Romania, at 90%, and lowest in Sweden, where it dips below 60%, findings of an ongoing EU-backed research project show.

Stark contrasts between the rate of employment and structural differences in strategies in relation to the blind are revealed in the report - the Hidden Majority.



“The rate of economic inactivity varies very widely. There is also a huge variety in the type of employment delivered,” co-author Fred Reid, the former president of the UK's National Federation of the Blind and Partially Sighted, told EurActiv in an interview.

Reid and his colleague Philippa Simkiss – the head of evidence with the UK's Royal National Institute of the Blind (RNIB) – compiled the reports over the past two years, covering Germany, the

Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Sweden and the UK.

Spain, Italy use 'reserved occupations'

Final reports on Austria and France are being finalised and a conclusion will be sent to the European Commission – whose employment and social affairs department

Continued on Page 5

Continued from Page 4

backed the research – next year.

The reports include statistics, summaries of the employment conditions in the relevant countries and recommendations for action.

One of the starkest contrasts was discovered between Spain, where employment for the blind is delivered through “reserved occupations”, and France, Germany and the United Kingdom, which attempt to integrate the blind into the mainstream workforce as much as possible.

“In Spain, 80% [of visually impaired in employment] are involved in the selling of state lottery tickets,” Reid said.

He said this was also true of Italy where “the visually impaired tend to be shepherded into jobs which are considered to be blind people’s jobs”.

“Sweden, Germany, the UK and Austria all have sophisticated support networks and they will provide a support officer where that is required, in those cases a sighted support worker is paid for by the state,” Reid explained.

The Spanish take the view that the lottery offers employment, where countries such as the UK have higher unemployment rates for the blind.

“They take the attitude: ‘Would you

rather have nothing?’” he explained.

Overall, the jobless rate in the eurozone is 11.4% and 10.5% in the EU-27, figures from the European statistics agency, Eurostat, show.

Few regional themes emerged

The Hidden Majority reports revealed that there are few regional generalisations to be drawn from the labour markets, with the situation in Romania and Poland offering contrasting pictures.

“The rate of inactivity is also high in Poland, but they are going systematically about changing that, and they have a rights-based system of employment support. A mainstream market will develop and grow,” Reid said.

But he claimed Romania was “very far behind”, and added that the head of the local blind association had told the researchers “that it is almost a third-world country”.

However, for every report, Reid said that the key recommendation was the need to develop state-funded support services.

Reid, who has been blind since childhood, said that he had conducted high-level talks with the Commission’s employment department on the reports.

“Unfortunately the principle of subsidiarity means there is little pressure they can directly bring to bear on member states,” he explained. In other words, Brussels has little say on the matter, which is in the hands of the member states.

Instead he is hoping that blind people’s organisations in the member states will study the findings and use these to put pressure on their governments.

Education is a problem in Denmark

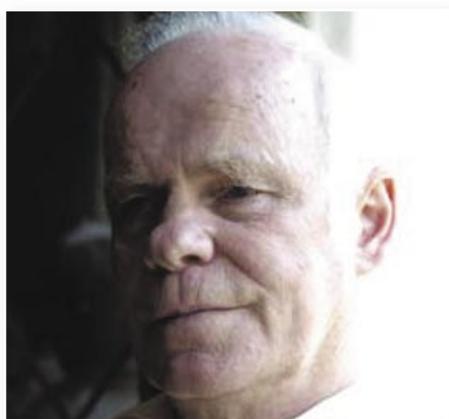
“Around 30% of the blind and partially sighted between 18 and 65 years have some sort of connection with the job market and this counts for both the full-time employed and those who only work five hours per week,” said Thorkild Olesen, chairman of the Danish Blind Association.

Olesen earmarked declining education standards amongst Denmark’s visually impaired as a particular problem.

“Our level of education has fallen drastically the past 40 years. Today, 57% of the blind and partially sighted between 18 and 40 years only have primary education among our members. So there are some problems that have not been solved. This is very serious,” Olesen said.

Blind rights activist: ‘In the UK, 66% of visually impaired are unemployed’

There are huge variations in employment conditions for visually impaired Europeans, but those countries offering more modern solutions do not always provide the best chances, says Fred Reid.



A former lecturer at the University of Warwick, England, Fred Reid went blind at the age of 14 and has since then spoken up for the rights of blind people. He has served as president of the UK National Federation of the Blind and Partially Sighted and as a trustee of the Royal National Institute of the Blind. In 1970 he helped to form the

Association of Blind and Partially Sighted Teachers and Students and edited its Bulletin for several years. He spoke to EurActiv’s Jeremy Fleming.

What is the nature of the research you have been conducting into the employment of blind and visually impaired in Europe?

I am the joint author of a series of reports – called ‘The Hidden Majority’ – and we’ve covered Sweden, Germany, Romania, the Netherlands, Poland and Austria, and we’re now finishing France. Austria and France will be published this year. The reports have included statistics, gathered where these are available and report on the employment situation in those countries.

Continued on Page 6

Continued from Page 5

Who is supporting these reports?

It is an EU-funded project administered by the European Blind Union and I have worked on it together with the RNIB's head of evidence, Philippa Simkiss. We have done it by spending three days or so in each country interviewing policymakers, NGOs and where possible those blind people affected by policies in the country.

What are the general themes that emerge?

The rate of economic inactivity varies very widely. In Romania it is nearly 90% of the visually impaired, whereas in Sweden it is slightly under 60%.

There is also a huge variety in the type of employment delivered. In Spain 80% are involved in the selling of state lottery tickets. If you look at Italy there is a heavy dependence on so-called "reserved occupations" for blind people. This means that the visually impaired tend to be shepherded into jobs which are considered to be blind people's jobs.

What kind of jobs are included amongst the "reserved occupations"?

The range is reasonably broad. It is not just telephony – though that remains one of the main jobs. There is some mainstream employment as well. The more common and modern approach is to skill up blind people and encourage them to join the main employment market. Sweden, Germany, the UK and Austria all have sophisticated support networks and they will provide a support officer where that is required, in those cases a sighted support worker is paid for by the state.

Presumably those support workers are more commonly provided in public sector work?

We do not have clear figures on the public/private mix, but speaking impressionistically, I would suspect that is true.

Are those countries where there is more reservation of specific jobs beginning to change?

There is a little evidence that Spain is beginning to change its approach, but they seem to take the view that it's better to sell state lottery tickets than nothing at all, and they look with pity on the UK, where 66% of visually impaired are unemployed. They take the attitude: "Would you rather have nothing?"

Are there common themes in regions, such as Eastern Europe for example?

Poland is a very sharp contrast to Romania. The rate of inactivity is high in Poland but they are going systematically about changing that and they have a rights-based system of employment support. A mainstream market will develop and grow, we said.

Romania was very far behind, the head of the local blind association said that it is almost a third-world country.

Are there general recommendations in your reports?

The chief recommendation, the one that I keep pressing, is the need to develop state-funded support services impairment. Blindness has special problems: training, provision of support and specific treatments need to be funded.

When the state moved in the UK from 1945 onward, the opening up of mainstream employment meant that the opportunities expanded for everyone: there was a doubling of the percentage of visually impaired in employment between 1945 and 1970, and another doubling in the period following that.

You contrasted those states offering the visually impaired "reserved employment" with those offering more access to the mainstream labour markets, is one approach better?

You have to balance imponderables. The rate of inactivity in Italy is under 50%,

whereas in the UK and Germany it's about 66% from our statistics. The impression is that Italy has a lower rate and so does Spain, but they achieve this by concentrating their efforts on the reserved employment. I know that in the UK if you go back 30 years you would hear blind telephone operators complaining bitterly that that was their sole form of labour available.

In Sweden there is a high rate of employment, but only 13% of that group work full time, the rest are part time. There are disagreements about this situation. Some say the employers are under considerable statutory constraint not to dismiss a person who becomes blind, and that this leads to employers guiding the visually impaired to part-time work. Others disagree, and say that those workers would prefer to be part time. Modern employment conditions for blind people can be very difficult, and travel can be a huge strain. So part-time employment might be a rational solution in those circumstances and I do not know which of these two opposing views is true.

What are you going to do with the report?

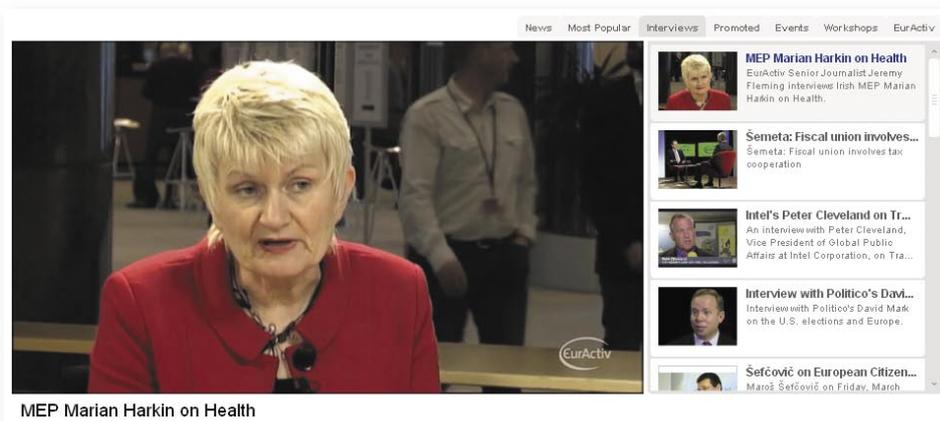
Next year we will send a general afterthought on the report. We have already had high-level talks with DG Employment and Social Affairs. Unfortunately the principle of subsidiarity means there is little pressure they can directly bring to bear on member states.

How would you like to see your reports used?

So much needs to be done. The blind people's organisations in the member states need to study these reports and to put pressure on their own governments. There are things that can be copied. In Sweden, for example, there is strong "retention legislation". Under this the employer must retain an employee losing his sight, or – where possible – offer similar employment. Such retention legislation does not exist in the UK, and I see no reason why it should not be introduced in other jurisdictions.

MEP Marian Harkin on Health

EurActiv Senior Journalist Jeremy Fleming interviews Irish MEP Marian Harkin on Health. www.euractiv.com/mep-marian-harkin-on-health



Germany eyes implants for ageing population

With an ageing population and blindness on the rise, German ophthalmic experts are taking strides to find innovative solutions to the sight crisis looming over Europe with pioneering implant technology.

Blindness is often caused by corneal diseases. The established treatment is a corneal transplant, but in many cases this is not possible and donor corneas are often hard to come by.

In the future, an artificial cornea - the transparent layer in front of the eye - could make up for this deficiency and save the vision of those affected.

Thousands of people have lost their eyesight due to harm to the cornea, such as trauma, damaged stem cells or diseases.

Cornea transplants are the therapy of choice for many of patients. Yet there are complications: there is a shortage of donor material and some patients cannot tolerate the implants.

In Germany – where around 7,000 patients are waiting to be treated – the Potsdam-based Fraunhofer Institute for Applied Polymer (IAP) research is attempting to improve the situation by



developing an artificial cornea.

“We are in the process of developing two different types of artificial corneas. One of them can be used as an alternative to a donor cornea in cases where the patient would not tolerate a donor cornea, let alone the issue of donor material shortage,” said project manager Joachim Storsberg.

New implant technologies

Clinical trials are about to start in Cologne and those involved rate the chances of success very highly.

At Heidelberg University Eye Clinic, new ways of bringing treatment to patients are being combined with new implant technologies to head of the rising problem of poor sight.

A new mobile cataract unit allows surgeons to provide cover for many more patients, increasing the number of

operations by 15% within the past year.

Gerd Auffarth, deputy director of the Heidelberg clinic, believes the unit will be able to take on increasing numbers of cataract patients in the future.

Germany readies for ageing eyes

Heidelberg is developing improved implants that enable the eye pressure to remain regular, and assisting normal sight. These implanted stents can be injected through corneal incisions of less than 0.5 millimetres.

More than 2,000 patients are being followed in controlled studies and the device appears as safe as alternative cataract surgery.

“The ophthalmology department in Heidelberg is doing what it can to catch up and prepare itself for the already increasing number of ageing patients with age-related eye diseases,” said Auffarth.

French move to create new eye professionals

A move by French opticians to gain greater professional recognition and to bolster a pan-European optometry examination system reflect wider calls for impaired sight to be given more emphasis by policymakers.



Currently, optometry education and licencing vary throughout Europe. For example, in Germany, optometric tasks are performed by ophthalmologists and professionally trained and certified opticians.

Unlike opticians, ophthalmologists hold medical degrees.

In France, there is no regulatory framework and optometrists are sometimes trained by completing an apprenticeship at an ophthalmologists' private office.

The union representing French opticians, l'Union Des Opticiens, this month reaffirmed its intent to see optometrists given formal recognition in France, calling for a regulation to establish the profession of "optician-optometrist".

Professional qualifications directive

This would give French people better access to health, a statement from the group said, and would help to clarify the standing of optometrists within the context

of the forthcoming European professional qualifications directive.

The French union wants to give such a recognised profession rights to carry out eye examinations and prescribe lenses and glasses, after an ophthalmologist first conducts an examination.

At the same time, the French delegate to the European Council of Optometry and Optics (ECOO) called for the establishment of accredited educational faculties across Europe, and for the establishment of a European diploma of optometry.

Four countries currently offer diploma

Schools in the Czech Republic, Germany, Norway and Switzerland now offer such a diploma. Its recognition by nine member states of the EU would give the qualification legal standing and enable optometrists carrying the qualification to practise across the Schengen area, according to the French union.

The lack of cooperation and adequate referral processes between healthcare disciplines was a specific criticism levelled at EU governments by MEPs at a meeting to mark World Sight Day at the European Parliament in Brussels on 11 October.

"By neglecting this area, governments are indirectly inducing severe disability amongst their citizens, triggering early retirement, disability pensions, higher costs for social care and social exclusion," said Greek MEP Ioannis Tsoukalas (European People's Party).

"Moreover, people suffering from blindness are faced with important financial challenges, in addition to the psychological burden," he told the meeting.

Professional integration is key policy issue

Tsoukalas said it was critical to ensure that preventable blindness is seen as a public health priority, and that the EU and member states work together to develop targeted programmes to ensure screening, and timely prevention and treatment at the

European policy level.

Irish Independent MEP Marian Harkin told EurActiv that statistics from the National Council for the Blind of Ireland (NCBI) showed that vision impairment costs the Irish health care system an estimated €116 million each year, and is expected to rise to €136 million by 2020.

"These increasing costs can be prevented, and many people's quality of life improved, if effective awareness campaigns encourage Irish citizens to go for testing," she said.

Meanwhile the European Forum against Blindness (E-FAB) – established in June 2012 as a multi-stakeholder partnership with the aim of raising awareness amongst policymakers – includes as one of its aims "a better cooperation between healthcare professionals" such as optometrists and ophthalmologists, "to ensure a better referral process and more integrated approach to care."

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