

## A view towards increased EU funding for eye research

EU-EYE, the newly formed European Alliance for Vision Research and Ophthalmology, comprises 9 European organisations<sup>i</sup> representing over 15,000 medical doctors specialised in the treatment of eye diseases and research. The members are working together at European level to raise political and societal awareness of the importance of basic and clinical research in the field of vision care and science<sup>ii</sup>. As the leading alliance of medical specialists' organisations in this area, EU-EYE is focused on raising its profile and ensuring that EU policymakers take better account of the views of the vision care and science profession and see it as a priority for research funding. EU-EYE welcomes any opportunity to provide you with more information and exchange views.

**Vision impairment leads to dramatic loss in quality of life. Increased research into eye diseases has the potential to improve the quality of life of millions of people and decrease inequalities in access to treatment, with significant benefits for public health as a whole.**

**EU-EYE calls on the EU institutions to make eye research a priority under existing and future research programmes in order to address the heavy and increasing burden of eye diseases and vision impairment on European societies.**

### **1. Current health policies do not sufficiently take into account the burden of eye diseases and vision impairment on European societies, which is expected to increase in upcoming years due to an ageing population and the growing prevalence of chronic diseases in Europe**

In 2010, it was estimated that over 28 million people were visually impaired in the WHO European Region<sup>iii</sup>, with the most prevalent diseases being cataract, age-related macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy and glaucoma<sup>iv</sup>. Vision impairment not only poses a burden on individuals through decreased quality of life, it also has an impact on society as a whole through increased healthcare spending and productivity losses.<sup>v</sup> According to 2010 estimates, direct and indirect costs of vision loss worldwide amount to over \$2 trillion and \$650 billion respectively<sup>vi</sup>. This burden is expected to increase significantly over the coming years due to an ageing population<sup>vii</sup> and the rise in chronic diseases.

EU-EYE recognises the vast disease landscape that health and research policymakers have to manage and appreciates, especially in times of financial constraints, all efforts to date in trying to address many different diseases. EU-EYE also welcomes the horizontal approach taken by the EU over the past years (e.g. on chronic disease policies) and the more recent emphasis on innovation.

**However, EU-EYE regrets that eye diseases are rarely mentioned in any EU health policies and calls on the EU institutions to change this, for example within the non-communicable disease and co-morbidity framework.**

- EU-EYE welcomes WHO efforts to reduce avoidable vision impairment as a global public health problem through the **2014-2019 Global Action Plan on Universal Eye Health<sup>viii</sup>** and **calls on the EU institutions to leverage this important initiative**
- **EU-EYE calls on the EU institutions to take the impact of eye diseases and vision impairment on society into account when defining European policies aimed at tackling chronic diseases and promoting prevention and active and healthy ageing**
- **To this end, EU-EYE calls for more emphasis on the impact of eye diseases and vision impairment on European societies and how to reduce it**

## 2. Despite the growing burden of eye diseases and vision impairment in Europe, there is currently limited focus at EU level on eye research through existing research programmes

EU-EYE fully supports ongoing efforts to achieve the EU Research Area and looks forward to the continued development of a fully integrated single market for research. EU-EYE very much welcomes the existing EU research programmes and our members actively participate in all relevant calls for proposals. However, more efforts are needed at EU level to promote eye research in order to **improve existing technologies for diagnosis and treatment of widespread, debilitating eye diseases (e.g. their effectiveness, accessibility, availability, cost)**. In addition, more research is crucial to develop innovative cures for a number of rare eye diseases for which there is currently no treatment available.

As medical specialists in vision care and science, we consider that the number of research projects in this area funded under EU research programmes is limited, providing insufficient opportunity for medical progress.

**There is an urgent need to address this already in the next research Work Programmes and, in the longer-term, in the post Horizon 2020 framework. EU-EYE also calls on EU institutions to make eye research a priority under the post 2020 EU Health Strategy and related Health Programme.**

- **EU-EYE calls for increased attention to eye research as a specific health and research area.** To support this, EU-EYE is committed to sharing data on the unmet need for adequate prevention, diagnosis and treatment of eye diseases to inform policies moving forward and support the EU in stimulating member states' action against eye diseases
- **EU-EYE calls for increased involvement of medical specialists in this area in the decision-making process for research funding, including:**
  - **Representation of vision care and science within key EU advisory committees in the field of health and research**
  - **Input to and evaluation of research Work Programmes**

**Only increased funding for eye research will allow better prevention, diagnosis and treatment of eye diseases and help address their large and growing burden on public health and society.**

The eye is a complex organ and several debilitating eye conditions and diseases are currently difficult or impossible to treat.<sup>ix</sup> Research into the risk factors of eye diseases, improvement of diagnostic and surgical procedures, and exploration of new treatment areas are key priorities to reduce vision impairment in the EU.

<sup>i</sup> European Glaucoma Society ([EGS](#)), European Eye Bank Association ([EEBA](#)), European Society of Retina Specialists ([EURETINA](#)), European Association for the Study of Diabetes ([EASDec](#)), European Paediatric Ophthalmology Society ([EPOS](#)), European Society of Cataract and Refractive Surgeons ([ESCRS](#)), European Association for Vision and Eye Research ([EVER](#)), European Society of Cornea & Ocular Surface Disease Specialists ([EUCORNEA](#)), European Vision Institute ([EVI](#))

<sup>ii</sup> Ophthalmology is the branch of medicine concerned with the study and treatment of disorders and diseases of the eye

<sup>iii</sup> World Health Organization, Global data on visual impairments 2010, <http://www.who.int/blindness/GLOBALDATAFINALforweb.pdf?ua=1>

<sup>iv</sup> R. Bourne et al. "Causes of vision loss worldwide, 1990–2010: a systematic analysis", *The Lancet*, 2013 Dec;1(6):e339-49

<sup>v</sup> Frick K D, Foster A, "The magnitude and cost of global blindness: an increasing problem that can be alleviated", *American Journal of Ophthalmology*, 2003;135:471–476.

<sup>vi</sup> AMD Alliance International, "The Global Economic Cost of Visual Impairment", 16 March 2010,

[http://www.icoph.org/dynamic/attachments/resources/globalcostofvi\\_finalreport.pdf](http://www.icoph.org/dynamic/attachments/resources/globalcostofvi_finalreport.pdf)

<sup>vii</sup> The proportion of those aged 65 and over and 80 and over is expected to rise, respectively, from 18 to 28% and from 5 to 12 % of the EU28 population (Eurostat, Population Projection Data (EUROPOP2013), <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/population-demography-migration-projections/population-projections-data>)

<sup>viii</sup> [http://www.who.int/blindness/AP2014\\_19\\_English.pdf?ua=1](http://www.who.int/blindness/AP2014_19_English.pdf?ua=1)

<sup>ix</sup> <http://www.eurostemcell.org/factsheet/eye-and-stem-cells-path-treating-blindness>