
Joint statement by the ECOO Public Affairs and Economic Committee and the Professional Services Committee

Better vision and eye health in Europe through digital development

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Introduction – The digital future

Covid-19 has forced Europe to think differently about many things. But one thing in particular has become apparent: use of new technology is a way forward.

The pandemic has been a huge driver for digital development, with increasing use of digital tools for communication with patients, information management and provision of healthcare services. The European Union (EU) has spent huge efforts in preparing the health care system for the future. This future will be way more digital than in the past.

In the very near future, patients will be able to get vital information about their own health from anywhere in Europe. The European Health Dataspace (EHDS) will be a place to collect and access health data. A high security level will be in place, and the patients of the future will not accept limited access to their own data.

The use of health data will not only be limited to direct patient care. It will also be a part of development of the health care system, for research and also more commercial use.

The division visible today between the healthcare system and private life will decrease – or may even vanish. Personal individual use of technology will contribute alongside the measures and findings done by professionals. The need for communication between different parts of the healthcare system will increase.

It will be vital that opticians and optometrists are able to both follow and contribute to the rapid development that comes.

Technical development

Healthcare itself will change, and the technology used by health care practitioners will be different. Patients will also self-monitor themselves using online services and m-Health¹.

Online services and m-Health have the potential to be a very good way to educate patients about vision and eye health, as well as a tool for different examinations offered by opticians and optometrists. This

¹ m-health means the use of smart/mobile devices to support health services and information.

again offers incredible opportunities for consultation and co-management of patients by multiple specialists in a short period of time and can significantly increase accessibility to professional advice.

AI will be widely used in the future, as well as big data. First for screening of diabetic retinopathy (DR), glaucoma and macular degeneration (AMD). In a very short time AI will expand and cover other areas of vision and eye health. AI will probably initially help opticians and optometrists to differentiate patients i.e. whether to make a referral or not. But soon AI will support opticians and optometrists to self-monitor patients, and to follow up patients who have been referred to ophthalmologists or others.

Communication – share data:

The EHDS will be one of the main sources of health data in the future. Data from patients will be stored in the health data space. Patients will have access to their own data when needed – regardless of where they are. Information from opticians and optometrists will probably also be a part of the EHDS, very much like the Finnish Kanta system. This gives opticians and optometrists new ways to communicate with other health care professionals, access their data, and through this – take better care of the patients.

This will of course raise questions about GDPR and data security. While this is addressed in the EHDS proposals, it will also need to be taken into account in all other e-health² and m-health applications used by eye care professionals and patients themselves.

Patients in the future will not accept closed data when they need health care. Despite their concerns about data security, patients are also willing to share information in their own interest. This will influence the flow of health data. Patients should be advised of the limitations of online services and m-Health and advised on how to protect their own health data. Patients should also have knowledge about what services are best delivered face-to face to ensure proper eye examination to maintain the best vision and eye health. Awareness of the limitations of online services, m-Health and other personal digital possibilities is also vital.

Who is responsible?

The key question in all of this is, when technology plays a larger role and machines makes their own decisions, who is responsible for that healthcare? This matter is not finally agreed on. Companies that develop these technologies should and need to have carried out their own due diligence and sought advice on liability.

Many argue that the health care professional will continue to be responsible when AI is part of the service. ECOO would like clarity on the details of this matter as soon as possible. This will provide reassurance to both patients and health care practitioners by ensuring they are fully aware of who is responsible at any time. Today the norm is that the health care personnel using, ordering or in other way gathering data about their patients, is also responsible for the patient care.

At today's level of technology, the focus is still only on independent tests. Ordering tests makes the eye care professional responsible. Opticians and optometrists play an important role in analysing and revealing false results from different machines. Machines do not yet make complete analyses of the whole patient situation. But when that starts to happen the question arises as to what exactly is the decision-making scope and responsibility of the eye care professional? All of this is not far down the road and eye care professionals need to be prepared.

² e-health is a broad term that encompasses healthcare services provided with the support of information and communication technologies.

What does this mean for opticians and optometrists?

To be a part of a patient's life, opticians and optometrists must be able to contribute to digital developments. They have the data needed to take care of people's vision and eye health, and they must be able to share and view data to help people in their daily lives.

Opticians and optometrists should also be involved in the design, introduction and maintenance of already present and new upcoming services.

Knowledge of both the pro and cons of m-health, AI and other technologies will be vital to provide good health services in the future. It is important to clarify when to use technology and when face to face still matters – and advise patients appropriately.

This all means that in the future opticians and optometrists must take responsibility for a larger portion of the patients than today, going beyond refraction and prescribing corrections.

In short it is important to become a part of these developments.

In practice this also means that there will need to be advice and guidance for all health care professionals and all patients. ECOO will work over the coming months and years to develop appropriate guidance with and for its members.

The future starts now:

This technology is already here and will continue to develop fast over a short time. The European Union is supporting and promoting this technological change and there are many startups and projects ongoing for tests and development.

Opticians and optometrists must look beyond the challenges and focus on the benefits of these tools. Professionals must build networks around their services in different digital directions. This will make them more capable of giving good care to patients. It will be even clearer in the future that the patient owns their own health data. At present legislation varies across countries, but this aspect will also soon harmonise. Paper journals will not be sufficient much longer. Professionals need to go digital!

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