

President's Insights August 2021

This month on August 19th it was World Humanitarian Day. Our Communications Committee headed by Emilee Nehring, OD wrote a wonderful post about the day including some great photos on the VOSH/International Facebook Page. I recommend it to you.

This time I would like to discuss an important issue facing optometry today.

Most countries of the world suffer from a lack of quality standards for eye care. In many countries the profession of optometry does not exist or is not recognized. When I travel to countries where the profession of optometry is under development I often get the question, "What is optometry? What does an optometrist do?"

In many of countries, to be an "optometrist" all a person has to do is buy an autorefractor, edger, lens blanks, and a supply of frames. They rent a small retail space and put out a sign that says "Optometrist" or "Eye Exams Here." The public has very little concept of what quality eye care is so they pay for a pair of glasses made this way. The patient could have glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy, or any other preventable or treatable eye disease but the "optometrist" doesn't know how to evaluate for or diagnose these conditions because they have no formal comprehensive education on eyes and vision. The "optometrist" would have no idea if their autorefractor were malfunctioning, which is fairly common, because they lack the knowledge to understand visual function as related to the glasses prescription and eye health.

Much of what VOSH/International does, along with other important organizations such as the World Council of Optometry (WCO), is to support optometric education and regulation at the national level. We help to define vision and ophthalmic care and promote the highest standards. Thus, we need to understand, remember and highlight the internationally accepted definition of optometry through our work.

The World Council of Optometry has the most concise, articulate statement of the definition of optometry to date. "Optometry is a healthcare profession that is autonomous, educated, and regulated (licensed/registered), and optometrists are the primary healthcare practitioners of the eye and visual system who provide comprehensive eye and vision care, which includes refraction and dispensing, detection/diagnosis and management of disease in the eye, and the rehabilitation of conditions of the visual system." As the global body representing organized optometrists, WCO's definition has the legitimacy and provides a clear goal for the development of the profession. The WCO has a publication called "Why Optometry?" that outlines why optometry is very important in addressing eye care and addressing preventable blindness and visual impairment.

At VOSH, we meet the country where they are. If the profession of optometry does not exist, we don't push for a 6- or 8- year optometric education. A 4-year optometry bachelor's degree program would be a good start and perhaps the most realistic option

It is in this context where many optometrists and vision scientists are helping to develop and improve optometry education and standards. Interestingly in the United States we are facing a very different battle. There is a push to deregulate optometry. There is an effort to make “eye exams” available online and to not require a prescription for spectacles or contact lenses. While the regulations often remain intact, often they simply aren’t followed or are ignored. The state boards that regulate optometry are good at identifying individuals that “practice optometry without a license” but they are not good at regulating entire nascent industries designed to sell as many spectacles or contact lenses as possible for profit.

Optometrists are being squeezed. There is a push for vision and health insurance plans to pay less and less for an eye exam. The result is that some optometrists are finding it difficult to remain in practice.

I don’t know how this is going to be resolved. What I know is that sharp, comfortable vision and good ophthalmic health are extremely important. Optometrists are well trained and uniquely positioned to be the primary eye care providers of the world. Internationally, there is increased recognition of primary eye health and vision care and the role of optometrists within. The recent and first United Nations resolution on “**Vision for Everyone; accelerating action to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals**” adopted unanimously by 193 countries, including the US, commits the world to provide eye health for the 1.1 billion people living with preventable sight loss by 2030.

With computer monitors, tablets and smart phones in use all over the world, and millions of people facing negative impacts in their learning, earning and wellbeing due to unresolved eye health issues, comfortable and clear vision will remain highly important for everyone. Thus, it is the responsibility of optometrists to remain steadfast and patient as we educate the public about our role in vision care, eye health, and overall health maintenance.

<https://worldcouncilofoptometry.info/concept-of-optometry/>

<https://worldcouncilofoptometry.info/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/WhyOptometry.pdf>

<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/world-report-on-vision>

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