## Preventable blindness puts a billion euro burden on European economies

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*50 per cent of the cases of blindness in Europe could be prevented, experts reported at the European Health Forum Gastein. A new study shows that eye diseases reduce the quality of life of those affected and put a multi-billion-euro burden on the European economies.*

**Bad Hofgastein, 1 October 2014** – Eye diseases reduce the quality of life for those affected. Moreover, they put a multi-billion-euro burden on the European economies. These are some of the findings of a new study commissioned by the European Forum Against Blindness (EFAB), which were presented at the European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG). “Blindness poses an economic burden of more than seven billion euros just in the countries covered by this study”, Glendon Harris from the European Forum Against Blindness and the AMD Alliance told the EHFG. “Yet the World Health Organisation says that 50 per cent of all cases of blindness in Europe are preventable and 80 per cent of all cases worldwide.“

The study conducted by Deloitte Access Economics examined the total economic costs incurred by blindness in the seven European countries of France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, Spain and Great Britain. Harris: “The enormous burden on the overall society and on the economy from eye diseases and blindness could be substantially reduced by targeted promotion of screening programmes and an expansion of preventive care, early detection and therapy. Measures such as the expansion of systematic test procedures and treatments of cataracts, diabetic retinopathy and glaucoma and the anti-VEGF therapy for wet age-related macular degeneration (AMD) can minimise not only the risk of blindness for those affected but also the burden on the overall society and the associated loss of productivity.“

**High costs for informal care**

Harris urged the European health care sector to give high priority to the fight against blindness, given the high percentage of preventable eye diseases and their effects. About 56 per cent of the health economic burdens from blindness occur in connection with informal care; one fourth from the loss of productivity. About one fifth of the total burden involves direct costs to the health care system from the cost of treatment including hospital stays, services in practices and drug services. According to the current study, the economic burden per blind person is nearly 10,000 euros.

**120 million workdays lost per year**

Glendon Harris: “The demographic trend is toward increasingly older European societies. This will cause the number of people affected by eye disease and sight loss to rise considerably. Investments in prevention and screening programmes, in early diagnosis and new treatment methods for retinal diseases are essential not just for health but for the productivity of the population. According to the study commissioned by EFAB, eye diseases resulted in a loss of more than 120 million workdays per year just in the countries analysed.

**Rapid rise in the incidence of eye diseases**

There are about 314 million people worldwide who suffer from vision impairments; 45 million of them are blind. Nearly 48 per cent of all vision impairments worldwide are attributed to cataracts. The countries of Germany, France, Italy, Slovakia, Spain and Great Britain alone have more than 26 million people suffering from this disease. About 3.8 million people in the above countries suffer from glaucoma, 2.8 million from wet age-related macular degeneration and about 1.8 million from diabetic retinopathy. WHO assumes that the worldwide prevalence of eyes diseases will double by 2020. The initiative “Vision 2020: The Right to Sight” seeks to counter this trend by demanding that greater emphasis be put on eye health in national health systems.

Harris: “It is plain from the socioeconomic implications of eye diseases in our study that Europe cannot afford to neglect investments in innovative and effective programs for eye health.”

“Electing Health – The Europe We Want” is the motto for this year’s EHFG. Around 600 participants from more than 50 countries are attending the most important health policy conference in the EU to exchange view on key issues affecting European health systems. The future direction of European health policy is the key topic on the conference agenda.

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