

1-3 percent of the population is estimated to be visually impaired. As elderly people increase in number, this estimated percentage is likely to increase. The prognosis is that up to 30 percent of EU-residents will suffer from some kind of functional disorder in the future related to the eye. The burden of visual impairment is not distributed uniformly throughout the world: the least developed regions have the largest share in visual impairments. Visual impairment is not equally distributed across age groups either, being largely confined to adults 50 years of age and older. An imbalance in distribution is also found with regard to gender all across the world: females are more at risk than males in acquiring visual impairments. Although there is intense progress in surgical interventions that have been used in many countries in the past few decades, cataract remains the most important cause of visual impairment in all regions of the world, except in the most developed countries. This alone shows us that visual impairments will be with us for a long time to come. Other major causes of visual impairment are, in order of importance, glaucoma, age-related macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy and trachoma (Bull World Health Organ. 2004 Nov ;82:844-51 15640920 (P,S,E,B))

A visually impaired person usually experiences one or several of the following symptoms: impaired accuracy of sight, inability to tell contrasts and colours, incomplete visual field, impaired and insufficient eye adaptation to changes in light levels and dazzle. These symptoms and the problems they create vary from person to person according to the nature of the visual impairment. These problems debilitate the person with visual impairment and prevent him/her from fully doing his/her share in society, oftentimes pushing the individual to isolation or more secluded and dependent lives.

To prevent vision loss and support rehabilitative services for people with low vision, it is imperative for the public health community and interested parties to address the issue through surveillance, public education, and coordination of screening, examination, and treatment.

In addition to the role of health care professionals and social services to ease the discomfort and barriers that the visual impairment creates, the families and relatives of these

individuals also have a determining role in their future. The role of families and relatives is crucial in the life of the visually impaired person since his/her functional disorder will deem it necessary for him/her to get some help at least in the beginning. This help and support need to be in many fields, covering his/her psychological well-being, safety, education, access to technology, employment etc. Since the role of the parents, relatives and loved ones is essential and imperative, they also need some support at the first stages of the individual's diagnosis in order to be able to give their full support and help. Since the new situation is alarming and frightening also for them, they will need information, knowledge, support systems and services and an ear to tell their worries and a shoulder to share their burdens.

With these in mind, the Project aims to help the parents and relatives of the visually disabled persons by providing information on eye diseases, eye problems, assistive technologies that are helpful for different conditions and needs and support organizations ranging from health care professionals to libraries where visually impaired persons and their loved ones will find help and support.

In order to realize this aim, the project undertakes a training course for the parents and loved ones of the visually impaired persons which will guide them in this difficult time of transition in their lives. The courses that will open in the partner countries will not only give guidance and information about the important questions and fields in the lives of the parents and relatives of visually impaired people who have found themselves face to face with a dilemma in their lives which has been brought about by the condition of the visually impaired individual but also provide help in terms of psychological support and opportunities to be together with people who have been going through the same just as themselves. In addition to the courses the project will present a web site which will be instrumental in helping the parents and the loved ones of the visually impaired individual by posting crucial basic information about eye diseases and problems, the health care solutions, assistive technologies and what to do in terms of creating a new life for the visually impaired individual, support organizations and institutions that the parents and relatives of the visually impaired persons can benefit from. The web site will also have information on general aspects and statistics of the visual impairments.

The research to provide materials for the training course and the web site covers 5 areas:

The Eye:

Eye in detail

Eye diseases and problems, Visual Impairment

Correctable eye diseases

Sources of Information

Assistive technologies:

Hardware assistive technologies for persons with Visual Impairment

Software assistive technologies for persons with Visual Impairment

Categories of Assistive Technology for Persons with Hearing Impairment

Categories of Assistive Technology for Persons with Cognitive Impairment

Navigation systems for the blind

Low vision tools manufacturers in Europe

Braille producers in Europe

Classroom tools and aids for the visually impaired

Sources of Information

Statistics:

The demography of blindness and partial sight

Facts and figures about disability

Facts and figures about visual impairment

Data related to Visually impaired individuals in EU countries

Sources of Information

Support Services:

Support Services for the families and relatives of the visually impaired persons

A list of useful web sites

Sources of Information

Organizations for the Visually Impaired Persons:

Libraries for the Blind and Visually Impaired

Selected International Websites with Links to Other Organizations

Organizations and Sources Of Information For Diseases With Impairment Of Sensory Functions

The research has shown that there have been monumental advances in improving opportunities and conditions for people with visual impairment over the past decades in access, technology and awareness of the public. Albeit these improvements, the situation is not nearly satisfactory since there are challenges in providing equal access to information and employment. These facts are apparent in the scantiness of the necessary statistics that is needed to make long term plans for that group. Although some countries seem to have gone a long way in terms of support services and identification of problems of the visually impaired, some countries are still behind. In order to even and balance the platform for the visually impaired across all EU countries, more research is needed and families and relatives of the visually impaired need to be informed of existing services and systems that are beneficial. These type of support will help the visually impaired to be more active, independent and less isolated and their social inclusion to society will make it possible for the EU to reach its goal of providing an equal opportunity environment for all people regardless of race, color, religion or ability.

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BSW = Bildungswerk der Saechsischen Wirtschaft GmbH, Dresden, Germany (DE)

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