

Global attitudes and perceptions about vision care

To mark this year's World Sight Day (October 14), *Optician* begins a new series looking at global eye care and eye health. In this first article, **Ian Davies** reports on a major survey of vision care beliefs and practices in 13 countries

Across cultures and national boundaries, people value sight as the most important of their five senses. Yet new research reveals that more than four in 10 people around the world share the misguided belief that seeing well translates to good eye health.

This is just one of the insights gained from the Global Attitudes and Perceptions About Vision Care survey, conducted on behalf of The Vision Care Institute, LCC, a Johnson & Johnson company.

The purpose of the survey was to better understand the incidence, practice and perception of eye examinations for adults and children worldwide. This article highlights the global findings and also compares and contrasts findings among the European countries involved (Russia, France, Italy and the UK).

Survey method and sample

The survey was conducted in 13 countries (Australia, Brazil, China, France, Hong Kong, Italy, Japan, Korea, Russia, Singapore, Taiwan, the UK and US). More than 6,500 adults aged 18-54 were interviewed in total. Online interviews were conducted in all countries but China and Russia, where interviews were via telephone.

The survey was conducted among a nationally representative cross-section of 500 adults per country between April and July 2008. National representation was based on gender, age, household income and geographic region. To ensure economic viability, survey respondents were screened for minimum household incomes based on specific standards and guidelines for each country. The 'global' numbers are calculated by a straight-line average of the data from the 13 countries

Results

Sight is valued as the most important of the senses across all cultures

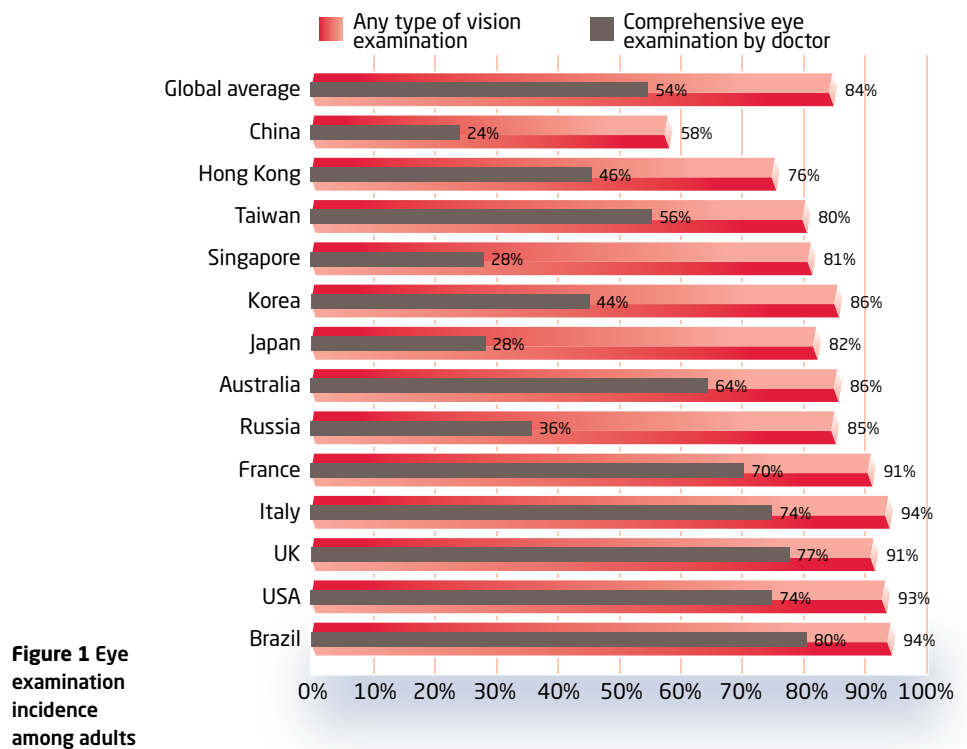


Figure 1 Eye examination incidence among adults

but respondents in some countries, notably the UK, US and Brazil, ranked sight significantly higher than other parts of the world. China, Taiwan and Russia ranked sight lower than the global average and other senses comparatively higher. Despite the high value placed on sight, more than four in 10 of those surveyed (44 per cent) shared the misguided belief that if their vision was good their eyes were healthy.

Globally, one in three adults (66 per cent) and more than one in five children (28 per cent) use some form of vision correction. In the UK, although a similar proportion of adults wear vision correction (68 per cent) only about one in eight parents or carers (13 per cent) report that their children do, a rate less than half that of the global average. In France and Italy, vision correction usage among children is much higher (27 per cent and 26 per cent).

A large majority of adults (84 per cent) report having had an eye examination, although incidence varies considerably from country to country, ranging from fewer than six in 10 in China (58 per cent) to more than nine in 10 in the UK and France (91 per cent), the US (92 per cent), Italy and Brazil (94 per cent) (Figure 1).

Yet for little over half of respondents globally (54 per cent) has the eye examination been described as comprehensive, and in some countries such as Russia and Japan the proportion reporting they receive a complete comprehensive examination is lower still (36 per cent and 28 per cent respectively).

The global incidence of general health (82 per cent) and dental examinations (91 per cent) is higher than that for eye examinations (54 per cent), although the UK differs with a higher proportion attending for eye than general health examinations (77

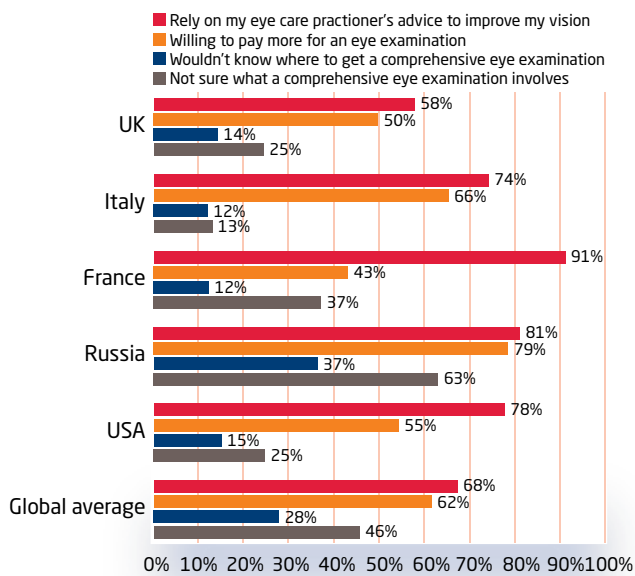


Figure 2 Eye examination attitudes and practitioner advice

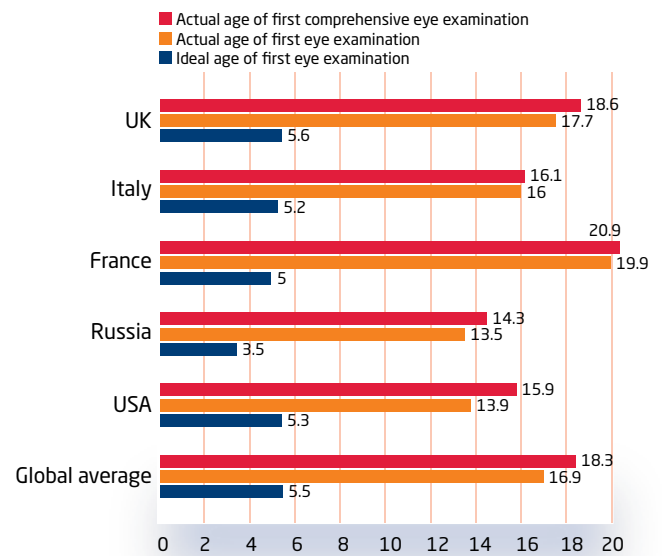


Figure 3 Age for first eye examination

per cent versus 33 per cent).

Britons also have a comprehensive eye examination more frequently (every two years) than they have general health examinations (every two and a half years). The global frequency of eye examinations is 0.74 times per year and two thirds are planning on having an eye examination in the next year.

Overall, there is lack of knowledge and insufficient attention to eye health; nearly half (46 per cent) are unsure what a comprehensive eye examination involves, although about six in 10 (62 per cent) say they are willing to pay more for a better examination (Figure 2). As many as one in four adults in the UK are unsure what a comprehensive eye examination involves but half say they are willing to pay more.

Patients also rely heavily on practitioners' advice on vision correction, although this varies by country, reaching a high in France (91 per cent) compared to the UK (58 per cent).

Perceptions and behaviours in relation to children's eye care are particularly revealing. The 'ideal' age for a first eye examination is perceived to be 5.5 years old globally, with little difference between countries in Europe other than Russia (3.5 years). But the age at which this actually takes place is 16.9 years globally and even later, 18.3 years, for a comprehensive eye examination (Figure 3).

Most people recognise the benefits of improved vision on quality of life, with widespread agreement on

improved self-confidence (72 per cent) and performance at work (71 per cent). One in three overall (67 per cent) acknowledge the effect of contact lenses on self-confidence. And there is slightly greater recognition of the impact of contact lenses on children's self-confidence and performance at school (76 per cent and 75 per cent respectively).

Globally, a large majority of adults (87 per cent) are aware that UV rays can damage their eyes, yet fewer than six in 10 (57 per cent) wear sunglasses and even fewer (38 per cent) ensure their children wear sunglasses outdoors. Parents are more likely to apply sun-block than insist children wear sunglasses.

Among European countries, France has the highest awareness of UV risks (92 per cent) and highest use of UV protective eyewear for both adults (75 per cent) and children (73 per cent). In the UK, UV awareness is similar to the global average while use of sunglasses is slightly higher than some countries such as the US, and on a par with Italy.

Discussion

The Global Attitudes and Perceptions About Vision Care survey provides fascinating insights from around the world and shows that gaps between attitudes and behaviour about eye examinations and vision care are common. This diversity of perceptions and beliefs globally presents both challenges and opportunities for practitioners.

National and regional variations may be accounted for, among other

factors, by differing modes of delivery and professional responsibilities as well as by demographic differences. Yet some beliefs and behaviours are common across all cultures.

Although many people neglect or lack understanding of primary eye care, they place tremendous value on their sight and many are willing to pay more for eye examinations. The opportunity to promote and charge appropriately for eye care is highlighted by the low scores for knowing what a comprehensive eye examination entails and where to obtain one.

Practitioners can help to educate families that caring for their eyes is just as important as other routine medical appointments, and impress on parents and carers the importance of early eye examinations and vision correction for children.

Practitioners also have an opportunity to encourage their patients to maintain ocular health by protecting their and their children's eyes from UV radiation.

As World Sight Day approaches, all eye care practitioners have an important role to play in helping to change attitudes and perceptions in their own communities, one practitioner and one patient at a time. ●

● **Ian Davies** is vice president Europe Middle East and Africa at The Vision Care Institute of Johnson & Johnson Medical. This article is based on a poster presented at the 2010 British Contact Lens Association Clinical Conference. For the full results of the survey visit www.thevisioncareinstitute.co.uk