

VOSH/International Statement on Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion

For almost 50 years VOSH/International and its chapters have provided the gift of vision and eye health to thousands of people worldwide. We offer our services to anyone experiencing economic, geographical, educational barriers to access quality eye care because we believe quality eye health should not be a privilege. We do not believe people should be discriminated on the basis of their race, color, religion, gender, gender identity, age, national origin, disability, marital status, sexual orientation, or the work they do. As the biggest global network of volunteer optometrists, we celebrate the abundance and diversity of expression the world has to offer.

It is undeniable that 2020 has brought unprecedented challenges and fundamental questions to our lives. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the unequal impact on the public health systems and the vulnerable communities that depend on them across the world. Everywhere, the tragic toll that COVID-19 has taken on ethnic minorities and disadvantaged groups is concerning.

This coronavirus does not discriminate, but health care challenges do not affect all communities in equal manner. For example, in Arizona -where I live- members of the Navajo Nation have been 4.4 times more likely to die from COVID-19 than other Arizona residents. In the US, black people are 3 to 4 times more likely to have a diagnosis of glaucoma compared to white people.

Sadly, in this already difficult context, the US has once again been confronted with the persistent pandemic of racism. The current global reaction to racism and the inequality it creates require us to seriously reflect on the changes that society needs and the role we can play in this change.

We need to be consistent with our values at home and abroad. We cannot feel unmoved and not hurt by what is happening in our society now. We do not discriminate against our patients or volunteers, but that is clearly not enough. We need to redouble our efforts to support access to optometry education to students from diverse backgrounds and be more proactive to ensure diverse representation in our leadership roles and structures. We need to be more proactive reaching fellow optometrists from black and minority backgrounds to collaborate helping communities through humanitarian eye clinics and public health education. But we also need to be humble and learn more about the challenges our black and minority colleagues face and be ready to support each other in times of need.

VOSH/International volunteers strongly feel that serving others in need brings the best of them. Let 2020 be the year where our vision strengthens, and we help others see that respect and kindness are the only way to a more just and equitable society for the benefit of all.

VOSH/International opposes racism and is committed to working for equality, diversity, and inclusion in the US and abroad.

John Daniel Twelker, OD, PhD, FAAO, FVI
President, VOSH/International