

President's Insights August 2020

This month we lost a giant of a human. Dr. Harry I. Zeltzer, who served as VOSH/International President 2001-2003 and was its first Executive Director between 2003 and 2013 was a humanitarian in every sense. In fact, he was awarded the Essilor-UNESCO Humanitarian Award in 2003 and the VOSH/International Lifetime Achievement Award in 2008 among other recognitions during his life.

When reflecting on his life, the formal definition of a humanitarian as someone who promotes human welfare and social reform takes a whole new meaning for us. It is not commonly known that prior to 2003 participation in the Annual Meeting was limited to VOSH/International executive officers and the board of directors, conveying a sense of exclusivity. Dr Zeltzer understood that to create a closer-knit family of humanitarians able to deliver our mission, each VOSH chapter should become part of VOSH/International and be able to make decisions, plan or lead the organization. In 2003 the constitution was amended for this purpose. Dr. Zeltzer was the motivating force behind this important reform.

Harry Zeltzer did not limit his passion to helping his fellow human beings using his professional expertise as an optometrist. The obituary in the Ipswich Local News describes Dr. Zeltzer as “a visionary and a true renaissance man with a big heart, an inventor, webmaster, artist, fisherman, and sailor who loved to dance.” As a sailor and fisherman, Harry Zeltzer understood the role of the human being in nature, as part of nature, and the importance of protecting our beautiful rivers, seashores and oceans from unneeded human damage and interference. As every good sailor, he respected the power of the ocean and other natural forces. He believed that in order for humans to be healthy and flourish, our environment must be healthy and flourish.

Everything that Dr. Zeltzer did was intended to open up and unify our organization and remove barriers that will prevent us from delivering our services or our patients accessing them. The definition of VOSH/International as a non-sectarian and non-political organization allowed us to have greater outreach and align us with like-minded organizations such as Doctors Without Borders.

In 2003, VOSH/International became an affiliate member of the World Council of Optometry (WCO) whose mission is to facilitate the development of optometry around the world and support optometrists in promoting eye health and vision care as a human right. Dr. Zeltzer understood the important role of WCO as the global leader for optometry and of other global initiatives such as VISION 2020 – The Right to Sight, a joint programme of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB), aimed at eliminating avoidable blindness in the world by 2020, which VOSH/International has been supporting since.

Dr. Zeltzer was a huge advocate for improving and amplifying the VOSH/International website as a source of information and resources, so that all chapters, partners and supporters could access it.

Like all great humanitarians, Dr. Harry Zeltzer took all of his skills – his great energy, intellect, training, and insight – and utilized them to help and inspire others. Born in 1929, another era, he respected the value of quality and tradition, while adapting daily to a new and emerging world. His last activity with VOSH/International was in June 2020 during our virtual midyear meeting when he shared his support for the WHO World Report on Vision. His words of encouragement to our efforts to circumvent the challenges faced this year, were warmly received. Dr. Harry Zeltzer lived life to the utmost and serves as an example of a life well lived in the service of others.

The World Report on Vision is found here: <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/world-report-on-vision>

More information on the World Council of Optometry <https://worldcouncilofoptometry.info/>