

100 years International Council of Ophthalmology

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The 40th World Ophthalmology Congress (WOC) of the International Council of Ophthalmology (ICO) was held in Prague, Czech Republic, from June 26 to 29, 2026. Delegates from member societies, ICO fellowship and examination graduates, young ophthalmologists, and directors of ICO fellowship and examination centers joined many ophthalmologists to celebrate the ICO's 100th anniversary.

The ICO connects ophthalmologists worldwide to help preserve and restore vision. It is an international organization that brings together about 180 national, supranational {such as the Societas Ophthalmologica Europaea [Societas Ophthalmologica Europaea (SOE)], Pan-American Association of Ophthalmology [PAAO], Asia-Pacific Academy of Ophthalmology [APAO], and Middle East Africa Council of Ophthalmology [MEACO]}, and subspecialty societies. The ICO works with these groups and the World Health Organization (WHO), supports ongoing education, and organizes the WOC.

The ICO's role has grown over nearly 170 years. Here are some key milestones in its history:

1857: The ICO traces its roots to the first periodic International Congress of Ophthalmology in Brussels, Belgium, in 1857, which marked the beginning of organized international ophthalmology. It is considered the oldest, continuously existing international medical society in the world.

1927: Events during and after World War I showed that isolated congresses could not sustain communication among societies. The ICO was then formally founded and institutionalized as a permanent organization with an advisory board in Scheveningen, the Netherlands.

1933: The International Federation of Ophthalmological

Societies (IFOS) was founded in Madrid, Spain, as an umbrella organization for the national societies. This indicated the start of a decades-long dual-governance architecture, with the IFOS serving as the umbrella organization and the ICO as the operational and executive body.

1972: The official relationship between WHO and IFOS was established.

1975: The World Blind Union (WBU; <https://wbu.ngo>) and IFOS formed the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB; <https://www.iapb.org>) to better achieve the elimination of avoidable blindness, together with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) active in the prevention of blindness and eye care.

1998: Registration of the official IFOS statutes in Zurich, Switzerland.

2008: To avoid confusion, the two names IFOS and ICO were merged into one: the International Council of Ophthalmology. This change was for clarity and branding, not due to any change in the organization's mission. The General Assembly of the IFOS/ICO member societies remains the highest authority^[1-3]. Since this unification, the ICO's leadership has passed through a succession of presidents, listed here in order of tenure:



Neeru Gupta (since 2021)

The current president and the first woman in ICO history to hold this office.



Peter Wiedemann
(2018–2020)



Hugh R. Taylor
(2014–2018)



Bruce E. Spivey
(2006–2014)

Bruce E. Spivey played a key role in the ICO's development. He was General Secretary from 1994 to 2006 and president from 2006 to 2014^[4]. During his leadership, the organization

changed direction and became a leader in ophthalmic education. He helped transform the ICO from a quiet professional society into an active global organization focused on education and skill-building. He also led efforts to professionalize curricula worldwide. As a result, the ICO became involved in curriculum development, certification, fellowship education, and teacher training in developing countries. In 1998, he and William C. Felch launched the website <http://www.icoph.org>. Bruce Spivey later described his presidency at a presentation during the SOE2023 congress in Prague as “the best period in the ICO’s history”. When his longtime colleague, William C. Felch (ICO Executive Director and, since 2007, CEO), resigned after WOC2018 in Barcelona, this era ended. The new president, Peter Wiedemann; interim CEO Neeru Gupta; and CEO Ivo Kocur (appointed in 2019) recognized that the existing structure was not sustainable and made the necessary changes. They also hired a professional congress organizer for WOC2020, the first congress in sub-Saharan Africa, which was only months away.

The ICO is the organizer of the WOC. Early meetings were irregular and held in major cities across Europe and North America. Starting in the 20th century, the congress became a regular global event. Since 2006, it has rotated every two years among Europe, Asia, the Middle East and Africa, and the Americas. The congress is now the main stage for global ophthalmology. Its revenues support the ICO’s international education and blindness prevention programs. The WOC remains a key global event for ophthalmologists and other eye-care professionals, as shown by the following list of host cities:

2006: São Paulo, Brazil (XXX International Congress of Ophthalmology)

2008: Hong Kong (XXXI International Congress of Ophthalmology)

2010: Berlin, Germany (XXXII International Congress of Ophthalmology)

2012: Abu Dhabi, UAE (XXXIII International Congress of Ophthalmology)

2014: Tokyo, Japan (XXXIV International Congress of Ophthalmology)

2016: Guadalajara, Mexico (XXXV International Congress of Ophthalmology)

2018: Barcelona, Spain (XXXVI International Congress of Ophthalmology)

2020: WOC2020 Virtual® (XXXVII International Congress of Ophthalmology). This congress was originally planned for Cape Town, South Africa, but became the organization’s first virtual event due to the COVID-19 pandemic. WOC2020 Virtual® was one of the first large, fully virtual global medical congresses during the pandemic and may have been the first of its kind in a major medical specialty. While it did not offer

in-person networking, the online format made the event more inclusive, allowing thousands of ophthalmologists from resource-limited countries to join for free and benefit from digital education. The congress also accelerated the development of digital teaching and exam formats, helping lead the way in online continuing education for international ophthalmology.

2022: WOC2022 Virtual® (XXXVIII International Congress of Ophthalmology). This meeting was also held online and focused on building advanced e-learning platforms. It was hosted by the Chinese Ophthalmological Society and co-hosted by the APAO.

2024: Vancouver, Canada (XXXIX International Congress of Ophthalmology). This congress was the first large in-person event after the pandemic, bringing together clinicians, researchers, trainees, and industry partners.

2026: Prague, Czech Republic (XL International Congress of Ophthalmology).

Since its founding in 1927, the ICO has continued to grow, advancing the right to sight through its member societies worldwide^[5]. The tools and science for good eye care are available, but the ongoing challenge is ensuring they reach everyone who needs them. The ICO acts as a link between ophthalmology and public health, connecting member societies, health ministries, and WHO priorities. This is a role the ICO must maintain, as the WHO regularly reviews its official relations status.

The ICO’s mission has stayed the same since 1857: to give world ophthalmology a voice and provide a shared platform for other ophthalmic organizations. Working with its partners, the ICO supports education and access to eye care, aiming to protect and restore vision everywhere. Technology and opportunities are better than ever, giving the ICO Board a chance to shape the future. Today, the main challenge now is not lack of knowledge or tools, but lack of will, funding, and political support. Bridging this gap and turning scientific progress into real improvements in vision care is the task ahead. In 2021, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted its first resolution on vision, committing all 193 member nations to universal access to eye care by 2030^[6]. This is both a major achievement and a serious responsibility.

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