



Update on OAC/OBC activity re: B.C. Opticians Regulation

Since the announcement by the B.C. Minister of Health about the opticians' regulation that is poised to be implemented on May 1st, the OAC and the OBC have spent considerable time listening to the concerns of our members. Many opticians are frustrated by the coupling of the increased scope of practice with statements about enabling consumers to purchase vision care products on the Internet by mandating the release of specifications. They fear losing their jobs to unregulated replacements and believe that consumers will be placing their vision at risk without fully understanding that risk. We share this frustration and were just as surprised as anybody about the lack of consultation on the dispensing changes. We note that the optometrists and the ophthalmologists have indicated they too were taken by surprise.

On April 6th the OBC and the OAC along with their government relations people met with the policy advisor to the B.C. Minister of Health to discuss the draft opticians' regulation. We clearly expressed our concerns about the changes in dispensing regulations. During this discussion we pointed to the unevenness of the regulation. Opticians will be required to adhere to a strict Standard of Practice in developing an assessment record for consumers including providing education relative to vision health. We believe this is important and fully agree with this requirement. On the other hand the Minister is not placing any conditions on unregulated providers. We believe at a minimum that unregulated suppliers should be required to inform consumers about the risks they are undertaking.

The government itself has identified two groups of people who it considers to be 'at risk' and has twice examined the rationale for this identification. Those who are under 19 and over 65 continue to be covered for eye examinations as an insured service. When considering the demographics for extending the opticians' scope of practice to include sight testing the government once again determined that the groups under 19 and over 65 are at risk. We have been told by the Ministry that unless the ophthalmology group is willing to collaborate with us in requesting the dispensing of eyeglasses and contact lenses to these groups be restricted to licensed professionals, the Ministry is not willing to modify the regulation. British Columbia ophthalmologists have indicated they do not wish to collaborate with opticians in making this case to the government.

The Ministry of Health appears to be firm in its commitment to the opticians' regulation as announced regardless of objections either in part or in its entirety from health care professionals. The OAC/OBC will continue to work toward requesting modifications to the regulation even after its implementation. At the same time we realize that business models for many health care professions are being impacted by Internet sales and for that reason our parallel activities will include focusing on a media campaign to educate consumers about the importance of seeing a regulated professional as well as working with provincial associations across the country in an attempt to influence the course of regulation elsewhere in Canada.

Moving Forward

The implementation of the B.C. Opticians regulation does not constitute an absolute. Regulation can always be changed in part or in whole. We are mindful that the increased scope of practice will be held up to scrutiny and that sight testing opticians must be scrupulous in respecting the Standards of Practice or risk jeopardizing this important addition to our services. This means we must understand completely what we are required to do. Toward that end the OBC/OAC will be participating in regional information sessions. We encourage you to attend once the schedule is announced.

As a parallel activity we need to start developing data to demonstrate to the Ministry the risk of harm we believe is inherent in enabling unregulated provision of eyeglasses and contact lenses. You can help with this project. We will be sending you a form that can be filled out and submitted to the OAC/OBC as you encounter and resolve consumer problems with products they have ordered online. This information will be turned into a database that can then support submissions to the Ministry over the next 18 months.

Business must continue. There is considerable confusion about what services we can charge for and those we cannot. Typically opticians have bundled their service charges into the retail price of the product. We recommend that opticians start placing a dollar value on their services and would like to have volunteers to work on a committee to develop a suggested fee schedule. We have developed a draft template but we need your input to ensure the figures are reasonable and reflective of our common sensibility.

Our standards and our accountability are what distinguish regulated opticians from unregulated providers and we must continue to promote this concept to consumers. The Licensed Optician public relations project has become extremely important because it is designed to embed in the minds of consumers the importance of trust, accuracy and recourse when they select a provider. You need to display the Licensed Optician mark in your dispensary and wear the Licensed Optician pin you will be receiving through the mail.

The OBC recently participated in an information session at Douglas College. There were 125 opticians in attendance and the session was broadcast via the Internet through technology provided by Douglas College. As a result of the questions asked we have developed an addendum to our Frequently Asked Questions document. We will continue to update this document as new questions are asked.