

Dear Senate Government Operations Committee,

We wanted to follow up after the last testimony on S.158 to provide you with information on the directives guiding optometry practice at the Veterans Affairs administration. These directives relate to how optometrists practice within the VA system, and how optometry externship programs receive training.

We discussed this with a VA Comprehensive Ophthalmologist. Because she is a federal Government employee she cannot use her name/title in any political activity, however our conversation was clear:

- Optometrists are NOT allowed to perform laser surgery, eye surgery or injections in the VA system - See attachment "Eye Care SEOC'S"
- You heard claims made that when Directive 1132 was rescinded, the authority of optometrists to perform laser surgery changed. It did not. The prohibition on the use of lasers language was incorporated into Directive 1121(2) - See attachment "VHA Directive 1121(2)"
- The VA is actively investigating claims that some VA patients have received laser treatments by optometrists via Community Care referrals in states where optometrists are allowed to perform lasers. This is explicitly against VA policy as stated in the Standardized Episode of Care (SEOC) agreements for Community Care referrals. It is our understanding that the VA National Program Director for Ophthalmology is actively investigating this issue to hold these optometrists accountable for violating VA policy.

While VHA Directive 1132: Performance of Therapeutic Laser Eye Procedures in Veterans Health Administration Facilities, dated May 27, 2020 was rescinded as a "stand-alone" directive prohibiting optometrists from performing laser surgery – the prohibition itself was not rescinded. Instead, VHA incorporated that "stand-alone" directive into a more comprehensive VHA eye care policy, [VHA Directive 1121\(2\)](#) - attached. By combining these two health care directives, the Department of Veterans Affairs has maintained its longstanding policy that **only licensed ophthalmologists** may perform therapeutic laser eye procedures in its healthcare facilities. The Directive states in pertinent part: "Therapeutic laser eye procedures in VHA are currently performed by only ophthalmologists and ophthalmology residents. To independently perform laser eye procedures, ophthalmologists must have completed an accredited ophthalmology residency approved by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education or the American Medical or Osteopathic Association, have appropriate training and experience in therapeutic laser procedures in accordance with the credentialing and privileging procedures at the VA medical facility, and be board-eligible or board certified by the American Board of Ophthalmology. Physicians who perform laser surgery must maintain currency in laser safety training provided within VA Talent Management System (TMS Laser Safety Training item #3870739) for initial granting of and maintenance of laser privileges."

Furthermore, we were also sent the directive of the VHA Office of Community Care – Standardized Episode of Care Eye Care Comprehensive, which states “Only ophthalmologists can perform invasive procedures, including injections, lasers, and eye surgery.” See attachment “Eye Care SEOC’S”.

This is too important of an issue to move forward with so much unknown regarding where and to what extent optometrists can receive training in surgery. Please do not move forward with S.158.

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