

Dear Members of the House Government Operations Committee:

I am an ophthalmologist practicing at Ophthalmologic Consultants of VT in South Burlington. Last year, I moved from a busy urban practice at Ophthalmic Consultants of Boston to embrace the Vermont lifestyle and join my dynamic highly skilled group. I'm writing with regards to the optometrist's scope expansion bill and your upcoming vote. I fully understand the desire for professionals to grow and understand the legislature's desire to support such growth. Best health care for all Vermonters (and Americans) is paramount. The current bill regarding optometrists' scope is predicated on the claim that laser eye surgery, among other procedures, requires minimal training and can be done with a weekend course, even for optometrists who haven't received training in a decade or more. As a former Clinical Assistant Professor at Harvard Medical School who taught hundreds of residents and fellows in ophthalmology, I can assure you that surgical training takes time, involving observation followed by performing numerous cases under the guidance of a skilled mentor. The surgeon must be prepared to handle a variety of post-operative courses and manage challenging complications. The Legislature needs to set standards to ensure the highest quality of care.

All surgical procedures including "minor" eye surgery may result in after hours emergencies that can cause blindness if not addressed promptly. This includes laser procedures. Twenty-four-hour access to post-operative care is imperative. Without that care, complications can cause significant pain, reduced vision, or even blindness. Every surgeon owes their patients access to 24/7 emergency care, ensuring another qualified eye surgeon in a shared call network is directly available by phone to promptly see the patient, 24/7. Having them listen to an answering machine or telling them to go to the ER is not fair to the patient or the health care system which is unable to staff most VT ERs with eye surgeons. As such, the proposed bill should not be passed unless training is addressed and the on-call responsibilities for optometrists are mandated to be equivalent to ophthalmologists performing the same procedures. That means insurance companies, already required by VT law to pay optometrists the same as ophthalmologists, without regard for differences in training, should require the same level of care for postoperative emergencies regardless of whether or not patient is cared for by an optometrist or an ophthalmologist. This is common sense and it would lower the standard of care to do anything otherwise. Why lower the standard when there is no financial or access benefit to actual VT patients? The current bill clearly lowers the standard of care in many ways. Please consider these facts as you consider your vote for this bill.

Sincerely,

Peter A. Rapoza, MD
Ophthalmic Consultants of VT