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New Optometry Legislation will Improve Access to Quality Eye Care for All Albertans

Edmonton, Alberta – The Alberta Government has announced changes that will improve access to quality eye care for all Albertans.

“It is well documented that Alberta has a shortage of doctors and a population that is aging,” said Dr. Sallie Barclay, President of the Alberta College of Optometrists (ACO). “By modernizing the law, patients – especially in rural communities – will be able to depend on their hometown eye doctor to treat their eye health needs efficiently, effectively and safely.”

Doctors of Optometry are located in over 90% of communities throughout Alberta. This pan-Alberta distribution combined with the new legislative changes will allow patients to have their diagnostic and treatment eye care needs provided by highly trained and competent optometrists at their first appointment. This helps eliminate unseen costs such as additional time off work and transportation expenses required by the patient (and their caregiver) for second or referral appointments which will also result in reduced overall billings to AHC.

Dr. Barclay also stated, “All of the changes to our scope of practice have been performed by optometrists registered in other jurisdictions in North America in a safe, skilled and competent manner for many decades. This change will allow Alberta optometrists to practice to the full extent of their training; something our patients have been looking forward to for many years.”

The Key Benefits

- Improved access to vision care services for all Albertans.
- Reduction in wait times for diagnostic and treatment vision care services.
- Improved patient outcomes by enhanced patient compliance and prompt intervention.
- Supporting the Department of Health goal of a multidisciplinary team approach in the provision of health care services.
- Integration of optometry within Family Care Clinics and Primary Care Networks.
- Reducing the strain on the health care system and hospital emergency rooms.
- Reducing the pressure on family physicians and ophthalmologists.
- Reduction in health care costs by reducing duplication of vision care services.
- Reduced fragmentation of care.

The Specifics of the Legislation Change

- a) **Pharmaceutical Prescribing** - To update the current practice of prescribing drugs from a limited list of drug categories to prescribing any oral or topical drug within the practice of optometry. The key benefit of this change will be that Doctors of Optometry are now allowed to prescribe the most appropriate drug for a patient's condition rather than have to choose from an outdated and potentially less effective, limited list of drug categories.
- b) **Glaucoma Treatment** – To expand the current mandatory co-management arrangement to allow Doctors of Optometry the authority to independently treat, co-manage or refer glaucoma patients. This legislative change will improve access to eye care services, improve patient compliance, reduce fragmentation of care and reduce duplicate billings to Alberta Health Care.
- c) **Lab Testing and Diagnostic Imaging** – To grant Doctors of Optometry the authority to order lab tests and perform ultrasound imaging. Since many systemic disorders exhibit ocular signs and symptoms, the ability to quickly order specific lab and imaging tests, arrive at a diagnosis and begin prompt treatment will improve patient outcomes, increase patient access to services and reduce additional billings to AHC. This amendment will not allow Doctors of Optometry the authority to independently treat systemic disease; but rather, will allow them to better collaborate and communicate with physicians and other health care practitioners in the continuing care of patients.

About the Profession of Optometry:

Doctors of Optometry currently provide the vast majority of all primary eye care in Alberta. They are highly qualified and trained eye doctors who examine, diagnose, treat and correct conditions, diseases and disorders of the human visual system, the eye and its associated structures. In addition to providing comprehensive eye and vision care services, optometrists play a major role in a patient's overall health and well-being by detecting ocular signs of systemic diseases such as diabetes and high blood pressure.

Optometric education consists of two distinct components: a 3 - 4 year B.Sc. undergraduate program at an accredited University and a 4-year Doctor of Optometry graduate degree. In addition, optometry students must complete mandatory clinical externships in a variety of clinical settings during their 3rd and 4th professional years. Following graduation, all optometrists must pass the Canadian National Optometry Board exam, partake in annual continuing education sessions to maintain competence; and, submit to regular on-site Practice Reviews in their private clinics.

The Alberta College of Optometrists is proclaimed under the Health Professions Act and mandated to govern its Regulated Members in a manner that protects and serves the public interest.

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