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ASPS ISSUE BRIEF

Optometry Scope of Practice

Background

For many years, optometrists have been attempting to pass legislation that would broaden their scope of practice in the states. Optometrists continually argue that they have the necessary training to perform surgical procedures in and around the eye (via laser or scalpel), injections and to also prescribe complex pharmaceuticals. Legislation that allows optometrists to perform a variety of complicated medical and surgical procedures creates a shortcut to becoming a surgeon by bypassing essential clinical education and training.

Many of the proposed bills would give optometrists authority to use a wide range of pharmaceuticals that require a fundamental and systemic medical understanding of the human body. Currently, most optometrists have a limited authority to use specific pharmaceuticals in a very narrow context, such as via topical solution. New legislation often seeks to expand this context to include oral and injection applications. Only physicians have the clinical and educational background to best protect patients in the rare instance when an allergic reaction or some other life-threatening complication occurs when these drugs are administered.

If optometrists are allowed to perform surgical procedures and administer pharmaceuticals, individual state Boards of Optometry will be granted the authority to determine the education, training and certification criteria that would be necessary to engage in activities consistent with the practice of medicine. It is in the best interest of patient safety and the citizens of a state that regulatory oversight of the practice of medicine remains under the purview of the Board of Medicine.

The Solution

In order to produce successful results against legislation that seeks to grossly expand optometric scope of practice, it is absolutely necessary to build relationships with other physician specialty groups that perform cosmetic injections and surgery in and around the eye and also with individual state medical societies. While umbrella organization groups such as the AMA and ACS may not have many members affected by these types of legislation, it is imperative that the philosophy remains that only physicians can be authorized to practice medicine. It is important to note that, in 2014, over 600 national and local medical societies opposed a bill in Louisiana that granted optometrists authority to perform certain surgical procedures, yet were unable to stop the state's legislature and Governor from moving forward with the bill.

This coalition should seek to educate individual state legislatures on the differences in training between physicians and non-physician optometrists. For example, while optometrists complete 4 years of optometry school before they are licensed, ophthalmologists complete 4 years of medical school followed up by 1 year of an internship and 3 years of residency training. In total, ophthalmologists complete 8-10 years of training in comparison to the 4-5 years of school that optometrists complete.