



Sight Testing: Why are optometrists upset over the proposed amendment to the Opticians Regulation?

The issue of sight testing by Opticians is part of a long line of "scope of practice" issues that occur among a wide variety of health care practitioners. The debate is similar to the heated debate more than 30 years ago about whether nurses could safely take blood pressure readings without the presence of a medical doctor or whether midwives could deliver babies without the supervision of an obstetrician. Whenever new technology or training enables one health profession to expand its range of skills and services, associated professions (who have often had a previous monopoly on the skill and service) question the safety and wisdom of such a change. Previously, only optometrists and ophthalmologists were allowed to conduct refractions and change the power of the corrective lenses. It is apparent that some optometrists are wary and seek to prevent a change that allows another profession to provide a service that is similar, although not identical, to part of the service that they provide.

However, past experience clearly shows that expanding the scope of practice of a profession can be done safely and effectively if clear and effective training and guidelines are established and if the regulatory College regulates the practice. Most importantly, experience shows that the public greatly benefits from an expanded scope of practice by being able to obtain a wider range and choice of services and providers, in order to choose the option that best meets their needs. The essential consideration is that those who use a service or a certain provider understand the strengths and limitations of that choice, and that effective training, guidelines and regulations govern the provision of that choice. So, just as a couple who are having a baby should clearly understand the difference between a midwife and an obstetrician and what services they provide, individuals who are having sight tests with an optician should understand the difference between opticians, optometrists and ophthalmologists and know the difference between a sight test and an eye health exam.

The Government of B.C. is to be commended for its leadership and foresight for planning to bring in a regulation to oversee the safe and effective provision of automated sight testing.