

# **ADVICE & GUIDELINES ON PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT**

## **FOR DISPENSING OPTICIANS**

### **SECTION 2: REGULATION OF PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES**

#### **General Professional Conduct**

6a. Dispensing opticians shall always place the welfare of the public, who require their professional services, before all other considerations. They shall behave in a proper manner towards their patients, the GOC, ABDO and professional colleagues and shall not bring them or the profession into disrepute. (See Appendix F – GOC Code of Conduct). They must maintain a high standard of behaviour, integrity and competence, bringing to bear all their knowledge, skill and expertise in serving the public. Dispensing opticians should be aware that conviction for any non-optical offence may cause them to appear before the GOC for bringing the profession into disrepute, and subsequently be reported to ABDO.

b. Dispensing Opticians should be aware of local NHS/PCT protocols, especially if working within the NHS.

7. Dispensing opticians must recognise their limitations by seeking further advice and guidance; or refer elsewhere when appropriate. In particular, those wishing to practise in specialised areas must be sure of their ability to do so, by obtaining specialist qualifications as available. All dispensing opticians have a duty to maintain and develop their professional competence throughout their careers, since only in this way can they continue to offer the best possible service to the public.

#### **Maintaining Professional Conduct**

##### **Indemnity Insurance**

8 a. It is a legal requirement that all dispensing opticians in practice and others under their supervision are covered by an appropriate level of professional indemnity and products liability insurance, and that they review the level of cover annually. Possession of such insurance is a condition of full membership of ABDO and is available (inter alia) from the Association.

b. Practitioners working in more than one business, as locums for example, are reminded that cover afforded by an employer of one business will not necessarily extend to another. Practitioners covered by an employer's insurance are advised to acquaint themselves fully with the extent and nature of the policy.

c. Members should note that claims can be made many years after an event. They must ensure that cover continues in circumstances where they change insurers, take a career break or retire.

### **Association with Lay Businesses (Unregistered Sellers).**

9. Some unregistered persons and unenrolled bodies corporate engaged in selling spectacles may employ registered dispensing opticians. While it is not unlawful to accept such employment, ABDO recognises that to do so could raise important legal and ethical issues and may create problems.

10. ABDO takes the view that it might constitute serious professional misconduct for a registered dispensing optician to enter, or to remain in the employment of, or in professional association with, lay persons (that is, not a doctor, hospital authorities, registered opticians or enrolled bodies corporate) whose business is carried on without regard to the principles of good professional conduct. The unregistered seller remains subject to no control but the employed registered dispensing optician, working full or part time, would be considered by the GOC as responsible for adhering to GOC policies and ABDO guidelines. Moreover, the fact that a registered dispensing optician is on the premises all or part of the time does not mean that all of the available service will be provided by registered personnel. It is misleading to suggest otherwise to the public. If any title is to be used, it should indicate the registered dispensing optician's name and qualifications and hours of attendance. It is also important to ensure that, in accordance with the Sale of Optical Appliances Order of Council 1984, the prescriptions of the following categories of patients are dispensed by or under the supervision of a qualified registered medical practitioner, qualified registered optometrist or qualified registered dispensing optician:

- a. Children under the age of 16.
- b. Those who are registered blind or partially sighted.

The provision of contact lenses to the public is also subject to the supervision of the above registered practitioners whose qualifications comply with the GOC Contact Lens (Qualification etc.) Rules 1988 (as amended).

### **Spectacle Prescriptions.**

11. Unlike unregistered sellers registered dispensing opticians may dispense a prescription of any age, if in their professional judgement it is safe to do so.

12. Registered dispensing opticians should explain to patients the nature of the prescription they have received and how it relates to them and their lifestyle, placing emphasis on the importance and value of proper dispensing in order to achieve optimum vision and comfort.

13. Registered dispensing opticians are reminded that under the Sight Testing (Examination and Prescription) (No 2) Regulations 1989 immediately following an eye examination, whether NHS or private, irrespective of whether the prescription is dispensed at the same practice or elsewhere, the prescriber is required to give the patient a copy of any prescription issued (together with an NHS voucher if appropriate) or a statement indicating that no prescription is necessary. Although the onus is on the prescriber, a registered dispensing optician has a moral public duty to ensure compliance. This enhances the

reputation of the profession; the prescription is the patient's entitlement and must be given back to the patient on completion of the dispensing.

### **Particulars to be included in a prescription or statement**

14. A prescription provided in fulfilment of the duty imposed by section 20B(2) of the Opticians Act shall include:-

- a. Particulars of any spherical power of each lens to be included in the appliance prescribed and, where appropriate, particulars of the cylindrical power (including particulars of its axis), prismatic power (including particulars of the orientation of the prism) and near addition of each such lens. (BS No: 2738-3/91 Part 3).
- b. The date of the testing of sight.
- c. The name and address of the patient and, if he/she is under the age of 16, his/her date of birth.
- d. The name and practice address of the prescriber who carried out the testing of sight.
- e. The address at which, or the name of the hospital, clinic, nursing home or other institution at which, the testing of sight was carried out.
- f. The PD is not a required part of the prescription. It is in the patient's best interests that their spectacles be dispensed by a registered optician and that the patient's PD is considered to be part of the dispensing, rather than prescribing process.

### **Issue of Duplicate or Copy Prescriptions**

15. When complying with requests from patients for either a copy of an existing prescription from practice records, or the provision of refractive details from an existing pair of spectacles, great care should be taken to ensure that circumstances cannot arise where the practice, or members of staff within a practice, could be alleged to have carried out a sight test and issued a prescription in contravention of the Opticians Act 1989, Section 24. When issuing a copy of the prescription from practice records, particular care should be taken to ensure that any document issued is authorised with the words...

"Certified copy of the prescription for spectacles issued by...(name of practitioner who carried out the sight test)...following a sight test on...(date of test)..."

and then issued under the signature of the person certifying the details. When providing refractive details from an existing pair of spectacles, any documents issued should be authenticated with a similarly worded caveat...

"Certified as the details of the lenses in...(details of frame)...worn by...(name of patient)...on the ...(date in question)..."

Confirmation of prescriptions must be in a written form to eliminate any possibility of error and given only with the patient's express permission. (Data Protection Act 1998)

### **Dispensing Optical Services - The Sale and Supply of Spectacles**

16. The purpose of the dispensing function is to translate an optical prescription into an order for a pair of spectacles, or other optical appliance, appropriate to the individual patient's needs. A registered dispensing optician should normally ensure that:

- a. The range of products is sufficient to meet the likely expectation of patients' needs, taking into account the style of practice, its location and the normal mix of patients who use it.
- b. The time available for each dispensing must afford to each individual the full extent of the practitioner's knowledge, skill and advice, having due regard to modern technology and instrumentation.
- c. Spectacles sold or supplied on the practice premises of a registered dispensing optician (the transaction) must be provided under the supervision of a registered dispensing optician or optometrist – this also applies to 'ready made' spectacles.
- d. Spectacles supplied are appropriate to an individual requirement, accurate, CE marked and of appropriate quality.
- e. Adequate measurements, including the PD are taken and recorded
- f. The suitability of frames offered for re-glazing is assessed before agreeing to undertake the task - and where it is deemed that a frame is unsuitable full reason should be given.
- g. The finished spectacles are checked for quality and accuracy against the original specifications.
- h. The finished spectacles are checked on the individual for function and comfort before they are taken from the premises.
- i. The requirements of the relevant British/European standards have been met. (See Appendix C )
- j. Patients know and understand the financial costs of the professional services and products offered before they are asked to commit themselves to payment. To this end patients should be informed in advance, itemising the options available for lenses and frames and of any additional features such as coatings or tints. Similarly itemised statements of account should be rendered. (Registered dispensing opticians must comply with the conditions laid out in the Consumer Protection Act 1987 Part III and the Price Marking Order 1999 ).
- k. It is considered unethical for a practitioner to receive inducements for recommending a course of action. Any decisions made by a practitioner should be made solely on the basis of need.

### **Duty to Refer**

17 a. Every registered dispensing optician has a statutory duty to immediately refer a patient to a registered medical practitioner or directly to a hospital for appropriate medical advice if it appears that a patient is suffering from disease or injury of the eye. In such cases a referral letter must be completed

and contain enough information such that the need for referral is explained so that the correct action is taken by the recipient practitioner. The dispensing optician's name and qualifications, the patient's name, address and date of birth, the last examination date and the visual acuities on that date (if known). If possible the visual acuities at the referral date and the symptoms with the duration of the symptoms' signs as observed by gross external examination of the eye or, if appropriate by slit-lamp bio-microscope examination along with relevant details of the patient's history including details of current and recent patient medication should be included. It must be stated that no ophthalmoscopy was performed. A referral made directly to a hospital is necessary if the condition is potentially sight threatening. The patient must be given a casualty note and advised to attend the Accident & Emergency Dept immediately. A copy of the casualty note must be sent to the patient's GP with a covering letter. The reason for referral should be explained to the patient, and it is good practice to support this in writing. Copies of referral letters must be kept with the patient record card. In due course the patient should be contacted and the record card annotated with the result of the referral. For non-urgent referrals, a full eye examination should be recommended as soon as possible.

b. If in the professional judgement of a registered optician there is no justification to refer a person consulting him/her to a registered medical practitioner, or that it would be impracticable or inexpedient to do so, the registered optician may at his/her discretion decide not to refer that person on that occasion; but in that event he/she:

1. shall record on the record card of the person consulting him/her:
  - i. a sufficient description of the injury or disease from which the patient appears to be suffering.
  - ii. the reason for deciding not to refer on that occasion.
  - iii. details of any advice tendered to the patient.
  - iv. an account of any action taken; and
2. if appropriate, and with the consent of the person consulting him/her, shall inform that person's general medical practitioner of those matters recorded.

A registered dispensing optician has the option of referring the patient to an optometrist. In that event, it will then be the optometrist's responsibility to refer or not, but it should be recorded that the referral has been made to the optometrist together with the details of the injury or disease from which the patient appears to be suffering and of any advice tendered to the patient. The registered dispensing optician must be fully cognisant of all ocular emergencies which would necessitate referral directly to a hospital.

### **Patient's Records**

18. It is essential in the interests of both registered dispensing optician and patient that full and accurate records, either hard copy or electronic, are kept and stored in a systematic and efficient manner. The retention period for records must be greater than the statutory limitation period. These periods will cover:

- i. the statutory limitation period which allows claims to be brought within:
  - a) 6 years for contractual matters; b) 3 years for personal injury. The three year period runs from the time that someone becomes aware that they have grounds for a claim (therefore reliance cannot be made on claims being brought within 3 years of the patient being seen).
- ii. The NHS requires NHS patients' records to be retained for seven years.

Minors, that is children under 18 years old, are entitled to bring claims in respect of personal injury upon reaching their majority, i.e. on becoming 18 years old, and for three years thereafter. Therefore their records should be kept until they are 21 years old, and it is recommended that they are kept until they are 25 years old.

**Note: If practicable records should never be destroyed.**

19. The dispensing records remain the property of the practice, however the Data Protection Act 1998 confers upon living patients and, in certain circumstances, other interested persons, the right of access to records held by, amongst other medical and paramedical practitioners, registered dispensing opticians. For deceased patients similar provisions are made in the Access to Health Records 1990. Patients also have a right to an explanation of the records and a right to copies. A charge of up to £50 can be made for supplying copies (if the dispensing optician thinks it appropriate). Where records are considered to be inaccurate, the patient has a right to have those records corrected. Accordingly it is necessary that a registered dispensing optician's records are complete, intelligible, reliable and maintained in a way which would not produce difficulties or embarrassment if examined by persons unconnected with the holder's profession or practice. The Act allows 40 days for response to an application for access to records. However, under the Access to Health Records Act, the practitioner may withhold the record if, in his or her judgement, it would be harmful to the patient to release it, although such a decision must be justified in the event of a dispute. Further information can be found at [www.bma.org.uk/ap.nsf/content/accesshealthrecords](http://www.bma.org.uk/ap.nsf/content/accesshealthrecords)

20. If a registered dispensing optician is uncertain about the appropriate response, it is important that, without undue delay, legal advice or advice from ABDO is sought.

21. ABDO takes the view that it is the duty of all registered dispensing opticians to ensure that information of a personal nature entrusted to their care be treated as confidential and divulged only with the patient's consent or when disclosure is required by law. Recorded information should include:

- a. Full name, address and daytime telephone number.
- b. Date of birth.
- c. Occupation (necessary knowledge for giving advice and guidance in dispensing spectacles).
- d. Recreation (for the same reasons as Occupation).
- e. General Practitioner's name and address.
- f. The Prescription.

- g. Measurements, tints, coatings etc, facial measurements and centration distances.
- h. Details of any other services provided – i.e. low vision aids.
- i. Charges and fees.

**Note:** If the General Optical Council (GOC) requests information from the dispensing optician, the dispensing optician should, subject to any statutory restrictions, promptly give the GOC the information that is requested. If such information is not supplied within fourteen days the GOC may seek a court order requiring that the information be produced (unless this is prohibited by any other enactment e.g. the Data Protection Act.)

### **Electronic Records.**

22. Many practices are now equipped with electronic record systems. In such cases it is necessary to register as data users under the terms of the Data Protection Act 1998. Details and application forms are available from the Data Protection Register, Information Commissioners Office, Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire SK9 5AF, Tel. 01625 545745. It is important that compliance with the Data Protection Act's requirements concerning patient information, including publication of information to third parties, for example other opticians, and medical practitioners, is observed. In particular, patient permission should be obtained to record data and screen privacy should be maintained to ensure such data remains confidential.

### **Ownership of Records**

23. The owner of the practice where a sight test takes place owns all records, including the clinical records. However to avoid any dispute over ownership it is advisable to include a clause clarifying ownership in any contract of employment, including any agreement with a temporary employee or a locum.

24. The confidentiality of records means that they should, in no circumstances, be passed on in a change of ownership of the practice to other than a registered optician, registered medical practitioner or enrolled body corporate and the patient must be notified. Should patients themselves choose another registered practice it is appropriate to provide a copy of the dispensing records on request as being in the best interests of all concerned, it is advisable to obtain signed authorisation from the patient before passing on the copy of the dispensing record.

25. Registered dispensing opticians who end employment in a practice in order to set up their own practice or work for a new employer must not use the records or their knowledge of the records of their previous practice for the purpose of canvassing for potential patients for their new practice.

### **Supplementary Dispensing Services**

26. Registered dispensing opticians may wish to offer their patients other supplementary services to meet particular needs. If the registered dispensing

optician is satisfied that he/she possesses the necessary knowledge, either by existing training and examination or by additional knowledge and skill acquired through continuing education and training, such services could include:

- a. The provision of contact lenses (see Section III – Contact Lens practice).
- b. Low vision assessment, advice and dispensing. See Appendix D – LVA practice).
- c. Delegated Functions in support of the medical or optometric profession.
- d. The provision of and advice on eye protection appliances.

Note: The practitioner should have information available about other services nationally and locally, e.g. local Social Services, Partially Sighted Society, RNIB etc.

27 a. When supplementary dispensing services are offered it is the registered dispensing optician's responsibility, to ensure that the precise nature of each service and the reason for it (advantages and disadvantages) are fully understood by the patient, together with the fees or costs to be paid, before the patient is asked to accept the service.

b. ABDO is not able to recommend fees to members. The Fair Trading Act 1973 (incorporated in the Enterprise Act 2002), in seeking to remove anti-competitive practices, prohibits associations and similar bodies from setting scales of charges for members to follow or from recommending fees. Fees are entirely a matter for negotiation between the purchaser (usually the patient's employer or the patient) and the practice undertaking the work. You should make a reasonable charge for the cost of the time, labour and materials needed to undertake the job.

28. Certain delegated functions e.g. refraction, visual fields, muscle balance, tonometry etc., may be carried out by a registered dispensing optician with the appropriate skills and knowledge, or at the direction of an optometrist or registered medical practitioner, as part of a full eye examination.

### **Ready-made Reading Spectacles.**

29 a. Anyone may sell ready-made reading spectacles, sports eyewear and prescription swimming goggles without infringing the law (within certain powers – see GOC regulations). The Association takes the view that, even so, registered dispensing opticians still owe a common law duty of care to any individual seeking to purchase ready-made spectacles, sports eyewear and prescription swimming goggles from them. The sale therefore must be subject to the supervision of a registered dispensing optician, optometrist or registered medical practitioner. Attention should be given to lens centration for each prospective purchaser. It is important that the registered dispensing optician is either satisfied that the prospective purchaser has had a recent eye

examination or understands the need for such an examination. All sales should be recorded including the specification and the:

- i. date
- ii. name
- iii. address of the purchaser

and should be accompanied by a clearly worded statement, at the point of sale, that the purchaser is advised to have a regular full eye examination every two years.

b. Optical appliances intended for use as protection or cover for the eyes in sports can be sold without prescription by an unregistered person providing that:

- i. neither lens has a power exceeding 8 dioptries and
- ii. the appliance is fitted with single vision lenses.

### **Disposal of a Practice**

30. When a practice is sold or otherwise disposed of, or when a particular practice association ends, registered dispensing opticians have a duty to ensure the continuing welfare of patients. In the case of closure, arrangements should be made for the transfer of patients' records to another practice. When the practice is transferred, the public, and in particular existing patients, should be informed and the new owners identified. (Also please see paragraph 8).

### **Dispensing Equipment**

31. In order to comply with the sale and supply of spectacle requirements, the equipment in a practice should be sufficient to discharge a registered dispensing optician's responsibilities effectively and efficiently. The following equipment is recommended:

- Back vertex distance (BVD) gauge
- Frame rulers
- Interpupillary distance gauge
- Demonstration lenses
- Frame heater
- Frame repair and adjustment equipment
- Focimeter
- Verification locating and marking apparatus
- Progressive power templates
- Lens thickness callipers
- Lens measure
- Temple head width callipers
- Facial gauge

## **Continuing Education and Professional Development.**

32. Dispensing opticians should abide by rules relating to compulsory education and training. This includes periods during which the dispensing optician is suspended from the register of dispensing opticians, or when career breaks are taken. Dispensing opticians wishing to practice in specialised areas should be sure that they have the necessary training and skills and comply with the specialty CET rules.

33. Those who cease practise (for domestic, health or other reasons) should ensure that they undergo appropriate CET before returning to practice.

## **Supervision**

34. Certain professional functions are regulated by law:

- a. The testing of sight, as defined in the Opticians Act 1989 and in the Sight Testing (Examination and Prescription) (No 2) Regulations 1989 – Section 24 and 26).
- b. The fitting of contact lenses (Section 25 of the Opticians Act 1989).
- c. The dispensing of spectacle prescriptions of a kind that unqualified persons are not permitted by law to dispense (Section 27 of the Opticians Act 1989).The method of supply of all optical appliances including ready-made reading spectacles, on the premises of a registered optician or enrolled body corporate (Section 17(5) of the Opticians Act 1989).

35. Under rules made by the GOC a person not qualified to fit contact lenses may fit contact lenses under the personal supervision of a suitably qualified person. Personal supervision means the supervisor must be on the premises and able to take appropriate action at all times when the trainee is engaged in the fitting of contact lenses.

36. The same level of supervision is necessary when spectacles are supplied to a person under the age of 16, or is registered blind or partially sighted, or where the purchaser produces a prescription over two years old, or when certain types of low vision aids are supplied.

37. While not required by the law, ideally all spectacles should be supplied by or under the supervision of a registered optician. It is strongly recommended that this is extended to the task of checking finished spectacles on the patient.

38. If a registered dispensing optician delegates any function to a lay person such as an optical assistant, irrespective of numbers, he/she remains responsible for the proper performance of that function. He/she has a duty, therefore, to be satisfied that the person to whom any function is delegated is:

- a. Adequately trained to perform that function.

- b. Appropriately supervised when performing that function to meet legal requirements and to ensure the safety of the patient.
- c. Understands the need to preserve confidentiality in relation to the patient.

39. Those registered dispensing opticians who are charged with the supervision of trainees in practice have a considerable obligation. Supervisors should ensure that their trainees are registered with the GOC.

40. Individual supervisors of pre-registration trainee dispensing opticians and contact lens opticians must be approved by ABDO and comply with the following requirements:

- a. Be registered with the GOC for more than two years.
- b. Undertakes to give continuous personal supervision to the trainee and accept full responsibility for his/her actions - i.e. be on the premises whilst the trainee is attending any patient. In the event of temporary absence from the practice due to ill health or holidays, it is the supervisor's personal responsibility to ensure another suitable registered optician will provide the same degree of supervision. For an extended period of cover (say in excess of four weeks) approval for such arrangements must be agreed with ABDO.
- c. Ensures the practice facilities and equipment are to the standard normally required for providing a full dispensing service.
- d. Ensures that the trainee receives practical experience in all areas of practice covered in the GOC Dispensing Core Competencies.
- e. Gives the trainee the opportunity to attend appropriate tutorial and revision courses.
- f. Takes an active interest so that the trainee is familiar with the practical examination syllabus, observes and comments on the trainee carrying out spectacle dispensing and adjustments and discusses appropriate selected courses of action.
- g. Permits a representative of ABDO to visit the premises at any time considered reasonable by appointment.

### **Serving Disabled Patients - The Legal Requirements**

41. Currently the Disability Discrimination Act affects all practices of whatever size as regards customer service. There are three things you must not do. You must not:

- a. Refuse to serve a disabled patient, solely because of their disability.
- b. Offer a disabled patient a lower standard of service
- c. Offer a disabled patient a service on worse terms

What constitutes a lower standard of service or worse terms is a matter of interpretation. It is important, however to offer disabled patients the same customer experience as their non-disabled counterparts.

42. It is important to recognise the range of people who are disabled under the law. Regulations cover all people with physical, sensory and learning

disabilities as well as those with mental health problems. It is not just about wheelchair-users who only account for 5% of all disabled people.

43. As well as the things you must not do, the law also requires you positively to do certain things:

- a. You must review all of your policies, procedures and practices and make reasonable changes to anything, which might make it more difficult for a disabled patient to use your services.
- b. You should take reasonable steps to introduce equipment or other methods, which make it easier for your disabled patients to access your services. Examples would be to provide a range of information in larger print for visually impaired clients or the provision of a text telephone for deaf patients or an induction loop for patients who use a hearing aid.
- c. You can consider alternative methods of providing a service. For example, home visits for wheelchair-users if your practice is physically inaccessible.

44. It is also worth bearing in mind that from 2004 the law broadened and you are expected to have taken all reasonable steps to make your practice premises physically accessible

### **Good Practice - Training**

45. All your staff must be aware of the law. They need to know that services for disabled patients are more than just a part of good customer care. All employees should have disability awareness training covering the etiquette of serving patients with the full range of disabilities.

46. This training should be carried out by suitably qualified trainers. Reading a book before a session is not enough to cover such a complex issue. Employees should also be made fully aware of the requirements of the law. If such training can be demonstrated, a company may be able to defend itself in a legal action.

### **Policies, Procedures and Practices**

47. How you organise your practice can have a very real impact on how friendly, or otherwise, it is to disabled patients. Ask yourself the following questions:

- a. Do all our plans include disability issues?
- b. Do we know who our disabled patients are and what they need?
- c. Are the premises user-friendly? Do disabled patients have easy access?
- d. Is our complaints procedure accessible? For example, could a deaf person use it easily?
- e. Is our information clear and accessible?

### **Employment Duties.**

48. The law also covers disabled staff. If you employ 15 or more staff, then they have a **right** not to be discriminated against by you and you have a **duty** to make reasonable adjustments to assist them in doing their job. The requirements placed on employers of 15 or more staff will soon be extended to **ALL** employers no matter how few staff you have.

### **Domiciliary Visits.**

49. A domiciliary service is intended for those who are house-bound. A registered dispensing optician offering this service should ensure that the required high standards of care, conduct and professional responsibility are provided.

50. Registered dispensing opticians carrying out domiciliary visits should be readily identifiable by name to the patient. As patients retain the right to freedom of choice of dispensing it is important that, should a dispensing be requested, a range of spectacle frames and/or other appliances (such as magnifiers etc.) appropriate to the patient's need, be made available.

51. Proper patient records must be made, kept secure and confidential. Domiciliary visits should not be viewed as a 'one-off' service. Specific arrangements must be made for a contact address and telephone number so that patients have access to a local contact for queries, advice and any necessary aftercare service in connection with the dispensing.

### **Consumer Complaints**

52. Wherever possible complaints should be given priority and speedily resolved within the practice. Unwillingness on the part of any registered dispensing optician to deal with a complaint does not reflect well upon either the individual or on the profession as a whole. It is therefore essential that a sound procedure for handling complaints exists and can be explained to patients by all members of staff.

53. ABDO fully supports the independent Optical Consumer Complaints Service, (OCCS) which was established to handle complaints that could not be resolved in-house. Any complaint against a member who refuses to accept any finding of OCCS will render himself/herself liable to investigation for conduct unbefitting membership of ABDO, and could result in GOC fitness to practise procedures being instigated.

54. It is important that when other organisations are involved – including the GOC, Primary Care Trusts (PCTs), Local Health Boards (Wales), Health Authorities, Scottish Executive, OCCS etc., information requested by such an authority is provided as promptly as possible, subject to the guidelines in paragraph 24.

## **Professional Publicity**

55. Although the GOC has ceased to issue rules on publicity, ABDO takes the view that any advertising by a dispensing optician should not bring the profession into disrepute.

56. Items for sale should be clearly marked with their price. It is very important that members of the public who might purchase the product or service are fully aware of prices and fees charged. Registered dispensing opticians should encourage the public to use eyecare and eyewear services and may employ acceptable publicity.

57. It is universally recognised that the success of the practice depends upon the public reputation it enjoys for the quality of the services and product provided. The public is the only true guide in this matter, since no registered dispensing optician can be competent to claim, directly or indirectly, that his/her quality of service is superior to that of professional colleagues. Any claim of superiority therefore carries a serious risk of being misleading and should not be made.

58. Registered dispensing opticians should observe their professional obligation to avoid publicity or advertising which could bring the profession into disrepute or which their colleagues or the public could find distasteful.

59. Considerable care has to be exercised when offering discounts or special offers to ensure that the public is not misled in any way. Complete details of any conditions connected with an offer or discount must be included in any advertising material and prominently displayed in the practice. Failure to do so results in prosecution being brought by Trading Standards Officers and involves GOC fitness to practice procedures. False claims of 'sale' items will incur similar action and penalties. (See Consumer Protection Act 1987 Part III)

## **Media Relations**

60. Registered dispensing opticians are occasionally called on by journalists and radio and television reporters to make statements on current issues in the profession, grant interviews or to help in the composition of feature articles, pamphlets or books. While good publicity and a free flow of information to the public through the news media is desirable and potentially of benefit to the public, such activities must be handled with the greatest of care, especially by the inexperienced.

61. It is preferable that questions about dispensing practice be dealt with by the ABDO Secretariat, rather than individuals. If there is no alternative but to make a statement on a professional matter of public interest, ideally advice and guidance should be sought from the Secretariat before responding.

62. Local newspapers frequently publish feature articles publicising some (usually retail) enterprise, associated with editorial matter and supportive advertisements by retail shopkeepers. Registered dispensing opticians are

advised to treat any such requests for interviews with caution and should insist on the right to approve the text of articles before publication.

63. ABDO takes the view that all registered dispensing opticians who own or manage practices must take responsibility for such publicity even if they can claim lack of knowledge.

### **Summary**

64. a. The registered dispensing optician should be adequately prepared for questioning. Avoid 'off the cuff' statements to casual callers; insist on time for reflection on questions from journalists if unprepared.

b. If unsure of how to handle the interview either refer the interviewer to the Association's Secretariat or seek the latter's advice.

c. If wishing to express personal opinions ensure that they are identified as such, and do not be harassed into imprudent over-simplification.

d. Avoid overt self-advertisement or assertions of superiority of professional services over colleagues.

e. Insist on editorial right to vet any material for publication.

f. Be especially cautious of interviews intended to be the basis of feature articles.

### **British and European Standards**

65. UK registered dispensing opticians may be placing themselves at risk in law if they do not supply lenses and frames that conform to the various Standards for appliances. (See Appendix C). This applies to all finished spectacles. The Standards have been 'registered' with the Department of Trade and Industry under the Consumer Protection Act 1987. The Act makes provision with respect to the liability for damage caused by defective products. Consumer goods (and this includes optical appliances) will be deemed not to conform to general safety requirements unless they comply with British Standards in the case of spectacles.

66. Existing ophthalmic standards are being further developed and British Standards have become based on European norms.

### **Medical Devices Directive**

67. The Medical Devices Directive (MDD) (93/42/EEC) covers a wide range of products. The Medical Devices Regulations (SI 1994 No. 3017), which implemented this Directive, came into force in the UK on 1 January 1995. From 14 June 1998 all devices placed on the market under the Regulations, with the exception of devices intended for clinical investigation and custom-made devices, must carry the CE mark. However, as regards ophthalmic devices, registration must occur in the following groups:

- 1- lamps in ophthalmic examination
- 2 - fundus cameras, keratometers/slit lamp microscopes
- 3 - low vision aids
- 4 - ophthalmoscopes/retinoscopes
- 5 - spectacle lenses
- 6 - spectacle frames
- 7 - ready-made non-prescribed spectacles
- 8 - sight testing devices

Further information is obtainable from The Medical Devices Agency, Department of Health, Hannibal House, Elephant & Castle, London SE1 6TQ  
Tel: 020 7972 8090/8300 (24 hours) Fax: 020 7972 8112. Website address:  
www.medical-devices.gov.uk

### **Registration and Enrolment**

68. The General Optical Council (GOC) was established in 1958 to promote high standards of professional education and professional conduct among opticians and to carry out some additional duties assigned by the Opticians Act. The GOC discharges its function in relation to professional conduct by means of its powers to require the registration of qualified dispensing opticians and to enforce standards by means of its disciplinary machinery. Under all circumstances it is the dispensing optician's responsibility to register and to maintain registration.

69. Registration with the GOC is essential for full scope of practice. The title dispensing optician is a registered title and can only be used by registered dispensing opticians. The GOC shall maintain a register of persons undertaking training as dispensing opticians. A person who is undertaking training provided by an approved training establishment or obtaining practical experience in the work of a dispensing optician shall have his/her name in the appropriate register.

### **Professional Discipline**

70. The professional activities of registered dispensing opticians are regulated in five ways: by education and training to standards set by ABDO; by ABDO as the professional body with its powers for peer review; by fitness to practise procedures at the instigation of the GOC; by criminal law; by civil law – litigation.

### **Criminal Records' Disclosure**

71. With the implementation of new legislation in Part V of the Police Act 1997, many organisations will now be able to access criminal record information, as part of their recruitment process, through a new service called Disclosure.

72. ABDO is registered as an Umbrella Body with the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) to carry out 'disclosures' on behalf of ABDO members who are employers. The CRB Disclosure service is used to help assess the suitability of

applicants for positions of trust and has been set up to facilitate safer recruitment of staff by making more information available from police and other records. The CRB provides a service to check on criminal records of candidates for jobs. The object of this checking procedure is to vet potential candidates and thereby reduce the risk of harm to children and vulnerable adults.

73. ABDO offers its Members "Standard Disclosure". This level of disclosure is recommended by the CRB for persons working with children, or who have regular contact with vulnerable adults on a one to one basis. These include optometrists and dispensing opticians. This disclosure will include:

- spent and unspent convictions, cautions, reprimands and warnings held on the Police National Computer
- information from the Department of Health and Department of Education and Skills lists for childcare positions.

### **Recruitment of New Staff**

74. Employers are entitled to have details of potential employees' spent convictions and ask for candidates to produce a basic disclosure from the CRB to assess the candidates' suitability for the role.

There is no legal obligation for employers to ask this question, but if asked the candidate is required to reveal any spent convictions. If at a later date it is found that the employee gave false information then the employer may be able to dismiss them. It is recommended that employers advise the candidates of this in the contract of employment.

### **Existing Employees**

75. Employers may only carry out CRB checks if employees sanction such checks or it is a condition of their employment. If a CRB disclosure is sought where there is no entitlement to do so e.g. on existing staff, this may be an offence under The Police Act 1977. This could result in imprisonment for up to 6 months or a fine (currently between £2,500 and £5,000).

### **Criminal Offences.**

76. Under Section 28 of the Opticians Act it is a criminal offence for a person who is not appropriately registered to use any of the titles dispensing optician, registered optician, enrolled optician or optician. However in the case of the use of 'optician' without a qualifying adjective the user will have a defence against a charge if it can be proved that in the circumstances of the title's use it would be unreasonable for people to believe that the user was registered.

77. Under section 24 of the Opticians Act 1989 it is a criminal offence for a registered dispensing optician to test the sight of another person with intent to prescribe an optical appliance. However, when contact lenses are fitted by registered dispensing opticians in accordance with the advice in Section III of

*these* guidelines, when a refraction by a registered dispensing optician forms part of an LVA examination, or when certain types of low vision aids are supplied, the use of techniques to check their performance does not constitute the testing of sight within the meaning of the Opticians Act.

78. By Section 25 of the 1989 Act it is a criminal act for any person (other than in the excepted cases) who is not a registered medical practitioner or a registered dispensing optician or optometrist with the appropriate qualifications, to fit contact lenses. The excepted cases are medical students and, by the Rules on the Fitting of Contact Lenses 1985, students training as opticians (optometrists or dispensing opticians); those engaged on approved basic training and pre-registration students. Such optical trainees, however, may fit contact lenses only when the fitting is done in the course of obtaining practical experience under supervision of a registered medical practitioner, optometrist or dispensing optician.

79. By Section 27 of the Act it is a criminal offence for optical appliances designed to correct a defect of sight to be sold (with some exceptions which include sales for the wholesale trade, for export and antiques) unless the sale is:

- a. Effected by or under the supervision of a registered medical practitioner, optometrist or registered dispensing optician.
- b. An excluded sale, that is a sale for a person not under the age of 16, of spectacles which have two single vision lenses of the same positive spherical power not exceeding four dioptres, where the sale is wholly for the purpose of correcting, remedying or relieving the condition known as presbyopia.
- c. Exempt by reason of the Sale of Optical Appliances Order 1984, that is, where the appliance is not a contact lens or low vision aid, where the sale is not for a person under 16, or who is registered blind or partially sighted, and where the purchaser produces a prescription not more than two years old signed by a registered medical practitioner or registered optometrist.

80. These sections, for the most part, do not penalise registered opticians. It is important to note, however, that if a dispensing optician's registration is revoked or suspended (for example, because of non-payment of GOC fees or the effect of a disciplinary order) he/she will be liable to prosecution if he/she continues to practice as though registered during the period of revocation or suspension.

81. It is also a serious criminal offence to defraud the National Health Service (NHS) of money through submitting false claims. Registered dispensing opticians, as trustees of NHS money, have a professional duty to handle payments appropriately, effectively and honestly. Abuse of NHS procedures is considered a serious breach of trust and may incur prosecution and GOC investigation, with possible consequential penalties imposed by ABDO.

*Note should also be made of the last sentence of paragraph 6. It is, of course, a serious offence to steal from the employer.*

## **Counter Fraud Charter**

82. ABDO and the Department of Health have agreed a Counter Fraud Charter to which they are both signatories. The Charter spells out the need to fight fraud and commits both the Government and the Association to do all in their power to educate, encourage and inform both professionals and patients about this vital issue. As well as reducing fraud and corruption to an absolute minimum the aims of the Charter are to free-up resources for the best possible patient care and to maximise the confidence that the public has in the NHS professions.

## **The Fitness to Practise Jurisdiction of the GOC – see Appendix A**

83. A registered dispensing optician who becomes involved with the GOC fitness to practise procedures should seek the advice of the Association at an early stage. Legal protection and professional indemnity cover in such an event is a benefit of membership.

84. The General Optical Council appoints selected members to its Investigation Committee. This committee investigates an allegation made against a registrant. It decides whether the complaint ought to be considered by the Fitness to Practise Committee, or by the Optical Consumer Complaints Service (OCCS), or whether the allegation warrants no further action.

85. a. The Fitness to Practise Committee is independent of the membership of the General Optical Council. It receives evidence and adjudicates on allegations made against a registrant following referral from the Investigation Committee. Other than in exceptional circumstances it deliberates and adjudicates in public. Its powers in the case of a guilty verdict range from an erasure order or suspension from the register or, if appropriate, conditional registration.

b. The committee may impose either in addition or instead of it, a financial penalty order currently not exceeding £50,000. In reaching a decision the committee will, in appropriate cases, take into account ABDO's Advice and Guidelines.

c. If either the Fitness to Practise Committee or the Investigation Committee finds a registered dispensing optician's fitness to practice is not impaired, they may nevertheless give the registrant a warning regarding his/her future conduct or performance. Such cases may be referred to the ABDO to invoke a Performance Review Procedure (PRP) although the GOC still maintains overall responsibility.

## **The Association's Powers**

86. By Article 17 of its Articles of Association, ABDO has the power to act against a fellow or member who is the subject of a complaint or whose conduct does not befit a Fellow or Member of the Association.

Article 17.1 (e) states that someone shall cease to be a Member

"If the Board of Directors, after due enquiry, resolves that the interests of the Association so require;"

Article 17.3 states

"In addition to its powers under 17.1 (e) the Board of Directors, after due enquiry, may suspend, or take some other action against, a member as it resolves that the interests of the Association so require."