General Optical Council

Standards of Practice for Optometrists and Dispensing Opticians

effective from April 2016

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Standards of Practice

Our Standards of Practice define the standards of behaviour and performance we expect of all registered optometrists and dispensing opticians.

The General Optical Council

The General Optical Council is the UK regulator for the optical professions with statutory responsibility for setting standards.

This document sets out the nineteen standards that you must meet as an optical professional. These standards are not listed in order of priority and include both standards relating to your behaviour and your professional performance. You will need to use your professional judgement in deciding how to meet the standards. To help you in doing so, we have provided additional information about what we expect of you under each standard. In relation to a small number of standards we may produce supplementary material where we feel that registrants need additional support.

Your role as a professional

As a healthcare professional you have a responsibility to ensure the care and safety of your patients and the public and to uphold professional standards.

You are professionally accountable and personally responsible for your practice and for what you do or do not do, no matter what direction or guidance you are given by an employer or colleague. This means you must always be able to justify your decisions and actions.

If someone raises concerns about your fitness to practise, we will refer to these standards when deciding if we need to take any action. You will need to demonstrate that your decision making was informed by these standards and that you have acted in the best interests of your patients.

Making the care of your patients your first and overriding concern

The care, well-being and safety of patients must always be your first concern. This is at the heart of being a healthcare professional. Even if you do not have direct contact with patients, your decisions or behaviour can still affect their care and safety.

The standards

As an optometrist or dispensing optician you must:

1. Listen to patients and ensure that they are at the heart of the decisions made about their care
2. Communicate effectively with your patients
3. Obtain valid consent
4. Show care and compassion for your patients
5. Keep your knowledge and skills up to date
6. Recognise, and work within, your limits of competence
7. Conduct appropriate assessments, examinations, treatments and referrals
8. Maintain adequate patient records
9. Ensure that supervision is undertaken appropriately and complies with the law
10. Work collaboratively with colleagues in the interests of patients
11. Protect and safeguard patients, colleagues and others from harm
12. Ensure a safe environment for your patients
13. Show respect and fairness to others and do not discriminate
14. Maintain confidentiality and respect your patients' privacy
15. Maintain appropriate boundaries with others
16. Be honest and trustworthy
17. Do not damage the reputation of your profession through your conduct
18. Respond to complaints effectively
19. Be candid when things have gone wrong

You will need to use your professional judgement in deciding how to meet the standards. To help you in doing so, the next section provides more detail about what we expect of you in relation to each standard.

1. Listen to patients and ensure they are at the heart of the decisions made about their care

1.1 Give patients your full attention and allow sufficient time to deal properly with their needs.

1.2 Listen to patients and take account of their views, preferences and concerns, responding honestly and appropriately to their questions.

1.3 Assist patients in exercising their rights and making informed decisions about their care. Respect the choices they make.

1.4 Treat patients as individuals and respect their dignity and privacy. This includes a patient's right to confidentiality.

1.5 Where possible, modify your care and treatment based on your patients' needs and preferences without compromising their safety.

1.6 Consider all information provided by your patients, including where they have undertaken research in advance of the consultation. Explain clearly if the information is not valid or relevant.

1.7 Encourage patients to ask questions and take an active part in the decisions made about their treatment, prescription and aftercare.

1.8 Support patients in caring for themselves, including giving advice on the effects of life choices and lifestyle on their health and well-being and supporting them in making lifestyle changes where appropriate.

2. Communicate effectively with your patients

2.1 Give patients information in a way they can understand. Use your professional judgement to adapt your language and communication approach as appropriate.

2.2 Patients should know in advance what to expect from the consultation and have the opportunity to ask questions or change their mind before proceeding.

2.3 Be alert to unspoken signals which could indicate a patient's lack of understanding, discomfort or lack of consent.

2.4 Ensure that the people you are responsible for are able to communicate effectively with patients and their carers, colleagues and others.

2.5 Ensure that patients or their carers have all the information they need to safely use, administer or look after any optical devices, drugs or other treatment that they have been prescribed or directed to use in order to manage their eye conditions. This includes being actively shown how to use any of the above.

2.6 Be sensitive and supportive when dealing with relatives or other people close to the patient.

3. Obtain valid consent

3.1 Obtain valid consent before examining a patient, providing treatment or involving patients in teaching and research activities. For consent to be valid it must be given:

- 3.1.1 Voluntarily.
- 3.1.2 By the patient or someone authorised to act on the patient's behalf.
- 3.1.3 By a person with the capacity to consent.
- 3.1.4 By an appropriately informed person. Informed means explaining what you are going to do and ensuring that patients are aware of any risks and options in terms of examination, treatment, sale or supply of optical appliances or research they are participating in. This includes the right of the patient to refuse treatment or have a chaperone or interpreter present.

3.2 Be aware of your legal obligations in relation to consent, including the differences in the provision of consent for children, young people and vulnerable adults. When working in a nation of the UK other than where you normally practise, be aware of any differences in consent law and apply these to your practice.

3.3 Ensure that the patient's consent remains valid at each stage of the examination or treatment and during any research in which they are participating.

4. Show care and compassion for your patients

4.1 Treat others with dignity, and show empathy and respect.

4.2 Respond with humanity and kindness to circumstances where patients, their family or carers may experience pain, distress or anxiety.

5. Keep your knowledge and skills up to date

5.1 Be competent in all aspects of your work, including clinical practice, supervision, teaching, research and management roles, and do not perform any roles in which you are not competent.

5.2 Comply with the Continuing Education and Training (CET) requirements of the General Optical Council as part of a commitment to maintaining and developing your knowledge and skills throughout your career as an optical professional.

5.3 Be aware of current good practice, taking into account relevant developments in clinical research, and apply this to the care you provide.

5.4 Reflect on your practice and seek to improve the quality of your work through activities such as reviews, audits, appraisals or risk assessments. Implement any actions arising from these.

6. Recognise, and work within, your limits of competence

6.1 Recognise and work within the limits of your scope of practice, taking into account your knowledge, skills and experience.

6.2 Be able to identify when you need to refer a patient in the interests of the patient's health and safety, and make appropriate referrals.

6.3 Ensure that you have the required qualifications relevant to your practice.

6.4 Understand and comply with the requirements of registration with the General Optical Council and the legal obligations of undertaking any functions restricted by law, i.e. sight testing and the sale and supply of optical devices.

7. Conduct appropriate assessments, examinations, treatments and referrals

7.1 Conduct an adequate assessment for the purposes of the optical consultation, including where necessary any relevant medical, family and social history of the patient. This may include current symptoms, personal beliefs or cultural factors.

7.2 Provide or arrange any further examinations, advice, investigations or treatment if required for your patient. This should be done in a timescale that does not compromise patient safety and care.

7.3 Only prescribe optical devices, drugs, or treatment when you have adequate knowledge of the patient's health.

7.4 Check that the care and treatment you provide for each patient is compatible with any other treatments the patient is receiving, including (where possible) over-the-counter medications.

7.5 Provide effective patient care and treatments based on current good practice.

7.6 Only provide or recommend examinations, treatments, drugs or optical devices if these are clinically justified, and in the best interests of the patient.

7.7 When in doubt, consult with professional colleagues appropriately for advice on assessment, examination, treatment and other aspects of patient care, bearing in mind the need for patient confidentiality.

8. Maintain adequate patient records

8.1 Maintain clear, legible and contemporaneous patient records which are accessible for all those involved in the patient's care.

8.2 As a minimum, record the following information:

- 8.2.1 The date of the consultation.
- 8.2.2 Your patient's personal details.
- 8.2.3 The reason for the consultation and any presenting condition.
- 8.2.4 The details and findings of any assessment or examination conducted.
- 8.2.5 Details of any treatment, referral or advice you provided, including any drugs or optical device prescribed or a copy of a referral letter.
- 8.2.6 Consent obtained for any examination or treatment.
- 8.2.7 Details of all those involved in the optical consultation, including name and signature, or other identification of the author.

9. Ensure that supervision is undertaken appropriately and complies with the law

This applies to supervision of pre-registration trainees and unregistered colleagues undertaking delegated activities.

The responsibility to ensure that supervision does not compromise patient care and safety is shared between the supervisor and those being supervised. Adequate supervision requires you to:

9.1 Be sufficiently qualified and experienced to undertake the functions you are supervising.

9.2 Only delegate to those who have appropriate qualifications, knowledge or skills to perform the delegated activity.

9.3 Be on the premises, in a position to oversee the work undertaken and ready to intervene if necessary in order to protect patients.

9.4 Retain clinical responsibility for the patient. When delegating you retain responsibility for the delegated task and for ensuring that it has been performed to the appropriate standard.

9.5 Take all reasonable steps to prevent harm to patients arising from the actions of those being supervised.

9.6 Comply with all legal requirements governing the activity.

9.7 Ensure that details of those being supervised or performing delegated activities are recorded on the patient record.

10. Work collaboratively with colleagues in the interests of patients

10.1 Work collaboratively with colleagues within the optical professions and other healthcare practitioners in the best interests of your patients, ensuring that your communication is clear and effective.

10.2 Refer a patient only where this is clinically justified, done in the interests of the patient and does not compromise patient care or safety. When making or accepting a referral it must be clear to both parties involved who has responsibility for the patient's care.

10.3 Ensure that those individuals or organisations to which you refer have the necessary qualifications and registration so that patient care is not compromised.

10.4 Ensure that patient information is shared appropriately with others, and clinical records are accessible to all involved in the patient's care.

10.5 Where disagreements occur between colleagues, aim to resolve these for the benefit of the patient.

11. Protect and safeguard patients, colleagues and others from harm

11.1 You must be aware of and comply with your legal obligations in relation to safeguarding of children, young people and vulnerable adults.

11.2 Protect and safeguard children, young people and vulnerable adults from abuse.
You must:

- 11.2.1 Be alert to signs of abuse and denial of rights.
- 11.2.2 Consider the needs and welfare of your patients.
- 11.2.3 Report concerns to an appropriate person or organisation.
- 11.2.4 Act quickly in order to prevent further risk of harm.
- 11.2.5 Keep adequate notes on what has happened and what actions you took.

11.3 Promptly raise concerns about your patients, colleagues, employer or other organisation if patient or public safety might be at risk and encourage others to do the same. Concerns should be raised with your employing, contracting, professional or regulatory organisation as appropriate. This is sometimes referred to as 'whistle-blowing' and certain aspects of this are protected by law.

11.4 If you have concerns about your own fitness to practise whether due to issues with health, character, behaviour, judgement or any other matter that may damage the reputation of your profession, stop practising immediately and seek advice.

11.5 If patients are at risk because of inadequate premises, equipment, resources, employment policies or systems, put the matter right if that is possible and/or raise a concern.

11.6 Ensure that any contracts or agreements that you enter into do not restrict you from raising concerns about patient safety including restricting what you are able to say when raising the concern.

11.7 Ensure that when reporting concerns, you take account of your obligations to maintain confidentiality as outlined in standard 14.

12. Ensure a safe environment for your patients

12.1 Ensure that a safe environment is provided to deliver care to your patients, and take appropriate action if this is not the case (see standard 11). In particular:

- 12.1.1 Be aware of and comply with health and safety legislation.
- 12.1.2 Ensure that the environment and equipment that you use is hygienic.
- 12.1.3 Ensure that equipment that you use has been appropriately maintained.
- 12.1.4 Follow the regulations on substances hazardous to health.
- 12.1.5 Dispose of controlled, clinical and offensive materials in an appropriate manner.
- 12.1.6 Minimise the risk of infection by following appropriate infection controls including hand hygiene.

12.2 Have adequate professional indemnity insurance and only work in practices that have adequate public liability insurance. This includes the following:

- 12.2.1 If insurance is provided by your employer, you must confirm that adequate insurance is in place.
- 12.2.2 If you work in multiple practices, you must ensure that there is adequate insurance to cover each working environment.
- 12.2.3 Your professional indemnity insurance must provide continuous cover for the period you are in practice.
- 12.2.4 Your professional indemnity insurance must cover complaints that are received after you stop practising, as these might be received years later – this is sometimes referred to as 'run-off' cover.

12.3 Ensure that when working in the home of a patient or other community setting, the environment is safe and appropriate for the delivery of care.

12.4 In an emergency, take appropriate action to provide care, taking into account your competence and other available options. You must:

- 12.4.1 Use your professional judgement to assess the urgency of the situation.
- 12.4.2 Provide any care that is within your scope of practice which will provide benefit for the patient.
- 12.4.3 Make your best efforts to refer or signpost the patient to another healthcare professional or source of care where appropriate.

13. Show respect and fairness to others and do not discriminate

13.1 Respect a patient's dignity, showing politeness and consideration.

13.2 Promote equality, value diversity and be inclusive in all your dealings and do not discriminate on the grounds of gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief.

13.3 Ensure that your own religious, moral, political or personal beliefs and values do not prejudice patients' care. If these prevent you from providing a service, ensure that you refer patients to other appropriate providers.

13.4 Respect colleagues' skills and contributions and do not discriminate.

13.5 Be aware of how your own behaviour might influence colleagues and students and demonstrate professional behaviour at all times.

13.6 Refrain from making unnecessary or disparaging comments which could make a patient doubt your colleagues' competence, skills or fitness to practise, either in public or private. If you have concerns about a colleague's fitness to practise, then please refer to standard 11.

13.7 Support colleagues and offer guidance where they have identified problems with their performance or health or they have sought your help, but always put the interests and safety of patients first.

13.8 Consider and respond to the needs of disabled patients and make reasonable adjustments to your practice to accommodate these and improve access to optical care.

13.9 Challenge colleagues if their behaviour is discriminatory and be prepared to report behaviour that amounts to the abuse or denial of a patient's or colleague's rights, or could undermine patient safety.

14. Maintain confidentiality and respect your patients' privacy

14.1 Keep confidential all information about patients in compliance with the law, including information which is handwritten, digital, visual, audio or retained in your memory.

14.2 Ensure that all staff you employ or are responsible for, are aware of their obligations in relation to maintaining confidentiality.

14.3 Maintain confidentiality when communicating publicly, including speaking to or writing in the media, or writing online including on social media.

14.4 Co-operate with formal inquiries and investigations and provide all relevant information that is requested in line with your obligations to patient confidentiality.

14.5 Provide an appropriate level of privacy for your patients during consultation to ensure that the process of information gathering, examination and treatment remains confidential. Different patients will require different levels of privacy and their preferences must be taken into account.

14.6 Only use the patient information you collect for the purposes it was given, or where you are required to share it by law.

14.7 Securely store and protect your patient records to prevent loss, theft and inappropriate disclosure, in accordance with data protection law. If you are an employee, then this would be in accordance with your employer's storage policy.

14.8 Confidentially dispose of patient records when no longer required in line with data protection requirements.

15. Maintain appropriate boundaries with others

15.1 Maintain proper professional boundaries with your patients, students and others that you come into contact with during the course of your professional practice and take special care when dealing with vulnerable people.

15.2 Never abuse your professional position to exploit or unduly influence your patients or the public, whether politically, financially, sexually or by other means which serve your own interest.

16. Be honest and trustworthy

16.1 Act with honesty and integrity to maintain public trust and confidence in your profession.

16.2 Avoid or manage any conflicts of interest which might affect your professional judgement. If appropriate, declare an interest, withdraw yourself from the conflict and decline gifts and hospitality.

16.3 Ensure that incentives, targets and similar factors do not affect your professional judgement. Do not allow personal or commercial interests and gains to compromise patient safety.

16.4 Ensure that you do not make false or misleading statements when describing your individual knowledge, experience, expertise and specialties, including by the use of titles.

16.5 Be honest in your financial and commercial dealings and give patients clear information about the costs of your professional services and products before they commit to buying.

16.6 Do not make misleading, confusing or unlawful statements within your advertising.

17. Do not damage the reputation of your profession through your conduct

17.1 Ensure your conduct, whether or not connected to your professional practice, does not damage public confidence in you or your profession.

17.2 Ensure your conduct in the online environment, particularly in relation to social media, whether or not connected to your professional practice, does not damage public confidence in you or your profession.

17.3 Be aware of and comply with the law and regulations that affect your practice, and all the requirements of the General Optical Council.

18. Respond to complaints effectively

18.1 Operate a complaints system or follow the system that your employer has in place, making patients aware of their opportunities to complain to yourself or your employer. At the appropriate stage in the process, the patient should also be informed of their rights to complain to the General Optical Council or to seek mediation through the Optical Consumer Complaints Service.

18.2 Respect a patient's right to complain and ensure that the making of a complaint does not prejudice patient care.

18.3 Respond honestly, openly, politely and constructively to anyone who complains and apologise where appropriate.

18.4 Provide any information that a complainant might need to progress a complaint including your General Optical Council registration details and details of any registered specialty areas of practice.

19. Be candid when things have gone wrong

19.1 Be open and honest with your patients when you have identified that things have gone wrong with their treatment or care which has resulted in them suffering harm or distress or where there may be implications for future patient care. You must:

- 19.1.1 Tell the patient or, where appropriate, the patient's advocate, carer or family) that something has gone wrong.
- 19.1.2 Offer an apology.
- 19.1.3 Offer appropriate remedy or support to put matters right (if possible).
- 19.1.4 Explain fully and promptly what has happened and the likely short-term and long-term effects.
- 19.1.5 Outline what you will do, where possible, to prevent reoccurrence and improve future patient care.

19.2 Be open and honest with your colleagues, employers and relevant organisations, and take part in reviews and investigations when requested and with the General Optical Council, raising concerns where appropriate. Support and encourage your colleagues to be open and honest, and not stop someone from raising concerns.

19.3 Ensure that when things go wrong, you take account of your obligations to reflect and improve your practice as outlined in standard 5.

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Alternative formats

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