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Redeployment of optometrists or dispensing opticians within pharmacy practice during COVID-19 pandemic

Regulatory statement issued by the General Optical Council (GOC) and General Pharmaceutical Council (GPhC)¹

Optometrists and dispensing opticians are trained healthcare professionals registered and regulated by the GOC.

Pharmacists and pharmacy technicians are trained healthcare professionals registered and regulated by the GPhC.

This statement describes how optical professionals might be utilised to support the delivery of pharmacy services, to relieve pressures on the pharmacy workforce due to the COVID-19 emergency and to provide a platform for future interdisciplinary interaction and support, post COVID-19. This statement, through a series of questions and answers, explores how this support might work.

1. What is the NHS guidance on the redeployment of optical professions in pharmacy?

NHS England has published guidance on ‘Deploying the clinical and non-clinical optical workforce to support the NHS clinical delivery plan for COVID-19’ (please see www.england.nhs.uk/coronavirus/publication/deploying-the-clinical-and-non-clinical-optical-workforce-to-support-the-nhs-clinical-delivery-plan-for-covid-19/). This guidance outlines the potential for the redeployment of optical professions to support pharmacy practice in either volunteer or paid roles.

We are not aware of similar documents produced by the NHS in Scotland or Wales.

¹ GPhC is the regulator for pharmacists, pharmacy technicians and pharmacy premises in England, Wales and Scotland.

2. I am an optometrist or dispensing optician – what redeployment opportunities are there within pharmacy practice?

The need for an additional workforce to assist within pharmacy practice varies across the UK. The need for redeployment is best ascertained at a local level, through arrangements between the following organisations:

- in England, local pharmaceutical committees (LPCs) and local optical committees (LOCs);
- in Wales, Community Pharmacy Wales and Optometry Wales; and
- in Scotland, Community Pharmacy Scotland and Optometry Scotland.

Specific national arrangements are outlined below.

In England, optometrists and dispensing opticians may register their interest in supporting their local pharmacists in either paid or volunteer roles through their LOC: <https://www.loc-online.co.uk/>

In Wales, optometrists and dispensing opticians can volunteer by contacting the COVID-19 mailbox at COVID-19.Pharmacy.Prescribing@gov.wales They will need to be checked through the Disclosing and Barring Scheme (DBS) in order to be eligible.

In Scotland, optometrists and dispensing opticians may register their interest in supporting their local pharmacists in either paid or volunteer roles by contacting: contact@optometriscotland.org.uk

3. What type of roles (either volunteer or paid) could optometrists and dispensing opticians perform within pharmacy practice?

Optometrists and dispensing opticians are ideally placed to assist pharmacy practice in the following support roles (either volunteer or paid):

- Delivering medicines
- Stock control
- Medicines Counter Assistant (assisting on the medicines counter)

- Dispensary Assistant (assisting in the dispensary)
- Healthcare Assistant

Some of these roles may require additional training, which can be completed through online training courses, some of which are GPhC-approved. The pharmacy practice will be able to advise. Some pharmacy practices will also require an up to date criminal records check (or equivalent).

4. What skills can optical professionals bring to pharmacy practice?

Alongside their professional competencies and accountability as a regulated healthcare professional, optometrists and dispensing opticians have directly transferrable skills which may be of use in a pharmacy setting. These include:

- Being able to communicate with a diverse range of patients
- Record keeping and maintaining patient confidentiality
- Safeguarding, including children and vulnerable adults
- Awareness of need to raise and escalate concerns about patient safety
- Patient consultation skills
- Familiarity with health and safety regulations, hygiene and infection control procedures
- Skilled at working in multi-disciplinary teams and undertaking supervision of delegated tasks
- Knowledge of basic pathology and physiology
- Knowledge of basic pharmacology and the risk of drug interactions
- Knowledge of drug administration and storage

Optometrists and dispensing opticians are regulated professionals subject to professional standards of practice: [Standards of Practice for Optometrists and Dispensing Opticians](#)

Some optometrists are also independent prescribers, able to prescribe drugs in relation to the eye and eye conditions and adhere to the non-medical prescribing framework.

5. What training is available to support redeployment?

GPhC-accredited online training for pharmacy support roles is available to optometrists and dispensing opticians. The main training providers in the UK are as follows:

- National Pharmacy Association: www.npa.co.uk
- Buttercups: www.buttercupstraining.co.uk
- CIG: www.cighealthcare.co.uk
- MediaPharm: <https://www.mediapharm.co.uk/>
- Scientia Skills: www.scientiaskills.co.uk/

In addition, Buttercups Training has launched two free online courses - 'Pandemic Training for Additional Staff to Support Pharmacy Services' and 'Training for Additional Delivery Drivers to Support Pharmacy Services During the Pandemic' which can be accessed here: www.buttercupstraining.co.uk/covid-19-updates

The optical professional bodies may also be able to assist: College of Optometrists²; ABDO³; FODO⁴ and AOP⁵.

6. What about professional indemnity insurance?

Registrants need appropriate professional indemnity cover for their clinical scope of practice. It is likely that a registrant's professional indemnity will only apply where they are carrying out their usual role of an optometrist or dispensing optician. If registrants are redeployed into non-eye healthcare roles they may no longer be working as an optometrist or a dispensing optician and therefore should not identify as such.

Where healthcare professionals are working for the NHS, the Coronavirus Act 2020 may provide indemnity cover for liabilities incurred by healthcare professionals while working beyond the scope of existing cover. Where professionals are not working for the NHS, their employer may provide separate cover.

² www.college-optometrists.org

³ www.abdo.org.uk/coronavirus

⁴ www.aop.org.uk/coronavirus-updates

⁵ www.fodo.com

For some non-clinical roles, indemnity insurance may not be required at all.

In all cases, registrants should ensure that they check with their insurance provider, NHS authority or other employer, that coverage is in place by one route or another. Guidance is available from the optical professional bodies.