GOC/COVID/13

Date of statement: 28 August 2020

General Optical Council (GOC) statement on use of technology during COVID-19 emergency

1. In these extraordinary times, we are fortunate that in all four countries of the United Kingdom we have a group of exceptionally well qualified eye care professionals on whom the general public and fellow healthcare professionals can rely. Uncertain times mean that our registrants may be called upon to work at the limits of their scope of practice and vary their practice for protracted periods of time and in challenging circumstances.

2. In this statement we hope to reassure our registrants that when they act in good conscience, for the public benefit, exercising professional judgement in all of the circumstances that apply, the GOC will support them.

3. Along with all other healthcare regulators, the GOC has signed a joint regulatory statement which acknowledges that registrants will need to act differently and deliver care in different ways during the COVID-19 emergency in line with Government and public health guidance. The GOC will take account of this in fulfilling its regulatory functions along with the following statement in response to a query regarding the use of technology, particularly online technology for use during remote consultations.

4. The relevant legal requirements are set out below.

Legislation

5. The Opticians Act 1989 does not restrict the type of equipment, products or technology that can be used by registrants.

Standards

6. Our standards set out the key principles that registrants must follow to keep themselves, those they lead or manage, and those they care for, safe. The standards are as follows:

    - optometrists and dispensing opticians: *Standards of Practice for Optometrists and Dispensing Opticians* – standards particularly relevant are:
        - standard 5 (keep your knowledge and skills up to date – see 5.1 and 5.3);
        - standard 7 (conduct appropriate assessments, examinations, treatments and referrals);
        - standard 12 (ensure a safe environment for your patients); and

- student registrants: *Standards for Optical Students* – standards particularly relevant are
  - standard 6 (conduct appropriate assessments, examinations, treatments and referrals under supervision);
  - standard 11 (ensure a safe environment for your patients); and
- business registrants: *Standards for Optical Businesses* – standards particularly relevant are:
  - 1.1.6: ensures that when introducing technological interventions, including artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning, they do not compromise patient care, and that professional standards continue to be met;
  - 1.2.4: only provides, promotes and utilises equipment, medications and medical devices (including software and other technologies) that are fit for their intended use, hygienic and in a good state of repair;
  - 1.2.5: ensures that staff utilising equipment, medications and medical devices (including software and other technologies) have undergone appropriate training in their use;
  - 1.2.11: ensures that unauthorised access to equipment, medications and medical devices (including software and other technologies) and restricted areas of the premises is prevented; and
  - 1.3.5: provides patients or carers with the information they need to be able to safely use, administer or look after medications or medical devices (including software and other technologies) that they have been prescribed or directed to use in order to manage their eye conditions.

Exercising professional judgement

7. We understand that some registrants may look to use equipment or technology that they have not used before during the COVID-19 emergency, in order to exercise social distancing in the practice or to offer care remotely when they are not able to see a patient in person. They may also want to use these to help them to make a decision about whether it is necessary to see a patient in person.

8. The landscape for regulating technology is complex. We do not have a direct role in the regulation of equipment, products or technology that is used by our registrants, and it is for our registrants to apply their professional judgment to determine when its use is appropriate. Outside of the provisions in the Opticians Act and Standards framework, both of which are mentioned above, we would not normally express a view about registrants' use of technology unless there was a specific patient safety issue.

9. A registrant must exercise professional judgement as to what equipment, products or technology to use to help them to assess a patient's needs. In exercising their professional judgement, registrants should take account of:

- relevant clinical advice;
- advice from the optical professional bodies;
- advice from other relevant regulators, such as the MHRA;
- their own due diligence regarding the product's licensing, safety, efficacy and provenance;
- their ability to use the technology in line with our standards;
- joint regulatory guidance on remote consultation and prescribing: https://standards.optical.org/supporting-guidance/remote-consultations-and-prescribing/;
- public health advice at the time in question (some individuals may be self-isolating and unable to attend, public transport may not be available, and some domiciliary visits may no longer be possible for instance);
- patient vulnerability (Government definition available here: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/staying-alert-and-safe-social-distancing/staying-alert-and-safe-social-distancing-after-4-july); and
- the nature of any specific clinical risks.

Recording your decisions

10. Registrants should make a note of their decisions, including the reasons for their decisions. The note should be made directly in the patient records, or where this is not possible, the patient records should be updated at the earliest available opportunity.

The GOC will keep this statement under review

11. Next routine review due: not later than 31 January 2021.