

GOC/COVID/07

Date of statement: 14 April 2020 (updated 1 May 2020 and 28 May 2021)

## **General Optical Council (GOC) statement on optometrists, dispensing opticians and students working in different settings during the COVID-19 emergency**

1. This statement will apply in the **red**, **amber** and **green** phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, as defined by [The College of Optometrists' red-amber-green classification system](#).
2. We acknowledge that this statement is more likely to apply in the red phase when routine primary care is suspended, but the ability to work in different settings is available to registrants at any point during the pandemic where they wish to do so.

### **Purpose of statement**

3. The purpose of this statement is to outline expectations on our registrants when working in different settings.

### **Calls to work in different settings**

4. The NHS and other employers may ask optometrists, dispensing opticians or students to be ready to support the wider COVID-19 response by using their professional skills and experience in different settings in either paid or volunteer roles, back-filling other roles in the health and care sector to fill workforce gaps. This could include:
  - clinical roles in eye healthcare e.g. acting as an optometrist or dispensing optician in a different setting such as a hospital;
  - clinical roles outside of eye healthcare e.g. administration of vaccines; carrying out clinical tasks in a pharmacy; or
  - non-clinical roles e.g. carrying out non-clinical tasks, such as porter duties or delivering food or medicines.
5. We are aware that the NHS has produced [guidance](#) on the wider roles that optometrists and dispensing opticians could support and as a regulator, we want to support registrants who wish to respond to calls from the NHS and others, while ensuring that patient safety is maintained.
6. Registrants will need to use their own judgement in deciding whether it would be appropriate for them to work in a different setting, based on their own responsibilities, contractual or otherwise, in delivering essential, urgent/emergency, or routine care in the optical setting and whether they have

any spare capacity. We would expect registrants to prioritise their role in eye health care above other areas of work.

### **Standards and competence**

7. When an optometrist, dispensing optician or student is providing support to the wider NHS or healthcare system, the same professional [standards](#) apply as in any other situation: registrants are professionally accountable and personally responsible for their practice and for what they do or do not do, no matter what direction or guidance they are given by an employer or colleague. This means they must always be able to justify their decisions and actions. The test is whether the registrant is appropriately trained, competent, indemnified and (where necessary) supervised for the tasks that they are being asked to undertake.
8. Registrants should also ensure that their own health does not put themselves or their patients at risk by following Government advice on COVID-19.
9. There are many tasks in the wider health service which could be performed by optometrists, dispensing opticians or students drawing on their existing professional skills and experience. Our registrants should satisfy themselves that they are competent to perform the tasks being asked of them or have been / will be given the necessary training, supervision and personal protective equipment (PPE) for them to do so, working within any legal restrictions on practice. An employer or the NHS should direct a registrant to appropriate training and/or advice on any legal restrictions on practice where this is necessary. Registrants may wish to access free e-learning resources for the entire UK health and care workforce from Health Education England<sup>1</sup>.
10. When determining which wider roles registrants are able to perform, either paid or as a volunteer, their current scope of practice is a useful starting point. However, it should not in itself constrain optometrists, dispensing opticians and students from supporting the wider COVID-19 response. We expect registrants to use their professional judgement in deciding whether to perform a task which is an extension of their usual scope of practice or outside of the usual scope of practice of the profession.

### **Indemnity cover**

11. 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.
12. 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

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.hee.nhs.uk/news-blogs-events/news/free-open-access-covid-19-e-learning-programme-entire-uk-health-care-workforce>

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.

13. For some non-clinical roles, indemnity insurance may not be required at all.
14. 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 <sup>2 3 4 5</sup>.

### **Joint working with pharmacy**

15. At the beginning of the pandemic, we produced a joint statement with the General Pharmaceutical Council to facilitate joint working. Pharmacy was where the pressures were understood to be at the time of the first 'lockdown' (as dentistry and optometry were only open for essential and urgent/emergency services) and we wanted to facilitate our registrants supporting this profession if they wished to do so. The joint statement is available in the annex.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.college-optometrists.org/the-college/media-hub/news-listing/coronavirus-2019-advice-for-optometrists.html?utm\\_source=social-media&utm\\_medium=graphics&utm\\_campaign=COVID-19](https://www.college-optometrists.org/the-college/media-hub/news-listing/coronavirus-2019-advice-for-optometrists.html?utm_source=social-media&utm_medium=graphics&utm_campaign=COVID-19)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.abdo.org.uk/coronavirus/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.aop.org.uk/coronavirus-updates>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.fodo.com/>

Annex

## **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)<sup>1</sup> on 29 July 2020 (previous ref GOC/COVID/12)

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/](http://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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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](mailto: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](mailto: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](http://www.npa.co.uk)
- Buttercups: [www.buttercupstraining.co.uk](http://www.buttercupstraining.co.uk)
- CIG: [www.cighealthcare.co.uk](http://www.cighealthcare.co.uk)
- MediaPharm: <https://www.mediapharm.co.uk/>
- Scientia Skills: [www.scientiaskills.co.uk/](http://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](http://www.buttercupstraining.co.uk/covid-19-updates)

The optical professional bodies may also be able to assist: College of Optometrists<sup>2</sup>; ABDO<sup>3</sup>; FODO<sup>4</sup> and AOP<sup>5</sup>.

## 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.

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<sup>4</sup> [www.aop.org.uk/coronavirus-updates](http://www.aop.org.uk/coronavirus-updates)

<sup>5</sup> [www.fodo.com](http://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.