



Optometrists and Oral Prescribing Privileges Oppose SB 718 (Bennett) and HB 261 (Caldwell)

Florida Patient Safety is in Peril

Through proposed legislation, optometrists in Florida are seeking to administer and prescribe oral medications. The Florida Society of Ophthalmology (FSO) strongly opposes these bills, as optometrists have not received the proper training and therefore are putting Florida patients in grave danger. There is no valid rationale for expanding the optometrist scope of practice into oral medications.

Myth 1: *Optometrists are as thoroughly trained as ophthalmologists to treat eye disease.*

That's not true. An ophthalmologist is a medical or osteopathic physician who completes four years of medical school, a one year internship, and an additional minimum of three years of residency. The most important and relevant pharmacology training occurs during the residency period. All of this time is spent in direct patient care under the supervision of an experienced physician. An ophthalmologist spends more than 17,000 hours of training in direct contact with patients. In addition, ophthalmologists are able to perform the most complex and delicate surgeries.

By contrast an optometrist is not a medical doctor or doctor of osteopathic medicine. Optometrists are only licensed to practice optometry, spend four years at an optometry college and only 10% complete an "optometric residency." An optometrist spends only 2,000 hours of training in direct patient care. The practice of optometry traditionally involves examining the eye for the purpose of prescribing and dispensing corrective lenses, screening vision to detect certain eye abnormalities, and prescribing topical medications for certain eye diseases. Pharmacology training is limited to the classroom and focused only on medications for the ocular system.

Myth 2: *Giving optometrists prescribing privileges will increase access to care.*

That's not true. Florida residents are not asking for optometrists to be granted prescribing privileges. This bill is being sponsored by the optometrists of Florida. There are no substantial claims of delay in getting an appointment with an ophthalmologist. Florida has the sixth largest concentration in the nation with 6.91 ophthalmologists for every 100,000 residents. There is no shortage of ophthalmologists in Florida and many rural areas have a far greater concentration of ophthalmologists than optometrists.

Myth 3: *Healthcare costs will decrease.*

That's not true. The fee schedule established by Medicare and Medicaid is the same for both optometrists and ophthalmologists and Federal law prohibits a difference in fee structure. Additionally, private insurers have similar regulations in place. In fact many patients can receive the specialty care provided by an ophthalmologist for the same price as an optometrist. Passage of the proposed bills would result in two levels of care at the same cost point. Prescription drug expenditures are the most rapidly growth segment of healthcare costs and dramatically affect the state Medicaid programs according to findings published in the *Annals of Family Medicine*. There are over 3.2 billion prescriptions written every year.¹



Myth 4: *Oral medications used to treat the eye affect only the eye.*

That's not true. A patient who requires an oral medication should be treated by a medical doctor or doctors of osteopathic medicine. Oral medications dramatically increase the amount that is absorbed into the body when compared with topical medications. Any oral medication, regardless of what it is prescribed for affects the entire body and can have significant interactions with multiple systems. Oral medications carry a far greater risk to the patient and serious complications can occur within 72 hours.

Ophthalmologists receive rigorous training in pharmacology including how medication affects the total body. A full patient medical history also needs to be obtained before prescribing. Optometrists receive almost no training on drug-drug interactions. In fact, Nova Southeastern University College of Optometry offers a “Therapeutic Pharmaceutical Agents Certification Course” that includes only 100 hours of lectures.² By contrast a doctor of pharmacy requires four years of professional study following a minimum of two year pre-professional study.³ If not prescribed correctly, mistakes at certain levels and concentrations could lead to death in pediatric or dialysis patients. The elderly face a greater risk or complications and side effects as they are more likely to be taking other medications.

According to the World Health Organization “The use and misuse of antimicrobials in human medicine and animal husbandry over the past 70 years has led to a relentless rise in the number and types of microorganisms resistant to these medicines—leading to death, increased suffering and disability, and higher healthcare costs.”⁴ In those not properly trained to prescribe are allowed such rights the drug resistant microorganisms will continue to grow.

Myth 5: *Florida optometrists should be given the rights to prescribe oral medications since many other states have similar regulations.*

That's not true. Just because other states have done something, does not mean it is the right thing for Florida. Our state is unique in that it has a high elderly and infant population. Florida has always been at the forefront of patient care issues as the existing statutes and safeguards demonstrate. Patient safety should not be comprised just to be part of the group.

In addition, many of the other states have limits to the oral medications that can be prescribed. The bills currently proposed have no limits to the class of medications, therefore it would be possible for and optometrist to write a prescription for a stomach ulcer.

Myth 6: *Optometrists have fewer adverse incidents than ophthalmologists.*

That's not true. There are no figures available on the rate of medical errors for optometrists. Since optometrists are not regulated by the Board of Medicine, adverse incidents are not required to be reported. Ophthalmologists and all physicians are required by law to report claims and adverse events to the Board of Medicine.

According to the *LA Times*, most major cause of preventable deaths are declining, but drugs are the exception. The death toll has doubled in the last decade and every 14 minutes a life is lost. In the same article public health experts care the rate to traffic accidents which has been steadily decreasing. This is the first time drug have accounted for more deaths that traffic accident since 1979.⁶



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About the Florida Society of Ophthalmology

The Florida Society of Ophthalmology (FSO) has a rich history of serving patients since its founding in 1939. The mission of the Florida Society of Ophthalmology is to promote and to protect the medical specialty of ophthalmology through active participation in legislative advocacy and through providing continuing medical education and the dissemination of responsible information to its members, physicians and to the citizens of Florida to ensure the delivery of the highest standard of eye care throughout the state of Florida.

For additional information contact the FSO:

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