

A New Direction

When Bill 171 received Royal Assent last year the role of optometry in Ontario was changed for all Ontario patients. Even though the framework for your optometrist to provide prescription medication to treat ocular disease has gained approval, the legal framework isn't in place yet and so patients haven't noticed any change in the way their eye care is being handled. Patients are still referred to family doctors or ophthalmologists when an antibiotic is needed for a "pink eye" situation or when an allergy interferes with contact lens wear. This inefficient model for eye care will hopefully change when the Ministry of Health officially grants optometrists the authority to prescribe medications in the weeks or months to come.

In my previous article I was discussing how the role of an optometrist, like a physician, can be described by roughly eight responsibilities: prevention, health education, health promotion, health maintenance, counselling, consultation, diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation. The first six responsibilities aren't changing significantly under the new amendments to the Optometry Act, but the last two should definitely change your perception of what your optometrist can do for you.

The responsibility of diagnosing ocular problems has always been the chief responsibility of your optometrist. You may come to your optometrist with a wide variety of signs and symptoms when you feel there is a visual or ocular problem that requires attention or in some cases you may have no problems. After a comprehensive eye examination it is my responsibility to diagnose any condition(s) that you may be suffering from or any that you are at elevated risk for developing in the future.

Using a thorough case history and an extensive battery of tests, your optometrist will determine whether your eyes are healthy; vision is corrected to its sharpest clarity; the eyes are coordinating and focusing properly; colour vision is normal; depth perception is accurate; is visual perception is appropriate.

Optometrists are concerned not only about diseases of the eye, but your overall health. Since many systemic diseases have ocular manifestations, we regularly detect diseases outside the eyes, or monitor the effects of these diseases on the eye. We may not diagnose diabetes, hypertension or strokes but changes in the eyes may be suggestive of these underlying conditions and an appropriate referral is made which will hopefully result in an appropriate management strategy to maintain your overall health.

The new role for optometry would include increased diagnostic powers when it comes to eye disease. Instead of finding signs suggestive of a bacterial conjunctivitis (bacterial pink eye) or corneal ulcer and referring to a physician, we would be empowered to make the diagnosis and formulate the appropriate treatment strategy. This empowerment would mean less time for treatment of the condition, increased patient satisfaction concerning their health care, and less time "wasted" in unnecessary referrals for medical prescriptions. This is the greatest change to optometry that Bill 171 will create for the average Ontario patient.

Optometrists also provide treatment and rehabilitation for many ocular conditions through the use of lenses, prisms, contact lenses, sight-enhancing devices, orthoptics, vision therapy, perceptual training and soon therapeutic drugs.

Most patients realize that their optometrist is highly qualified to provide glasses or contact lenses to treat refractive problems. Did you know that your optometrist also is trained to instruct and supervise specialized vision therapy to strengthen your ability to focus and fixate properly? Or initiate low vision services for patients who are unable to function in a normal visual environment? Or advise and provide appropriate devices for work, sport and recreational activities to limit the risk of injury?

With the new changes, your optometrist will also be able to assess the efficacy of treatment procedures related to the eyes and modify them as required to maximize patient benefits.

The authority to prescribe medication will change the role your optometrist plays in your health care plan by increasing your access to timely care. Optometrists are trained to diagnose and treat a wide range of diseases and this new direction in Ontario will unshackle your optometrist's hands to allow us to diagnose, treat and manage you to the best of our training. Talk to your MPP and tell them that Bill 171 needs to be fully implemented today to improve your health care options.