

PRESS RELEASE

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For Immediate Release

VERMONT EYE PHYSICIANS RAISE ALARM ABOUT SAFETY RISKS OF LOWERING STANDARDS FOR PERFORMING INVASIVE EYE SURGERY

MONTPELIER, VT. (1/3/24) – As the Vermont Legislature convenes today, the Vermont Ophthalmological Society (VOS) is raising the alarm about an expected push from the optometry lobby to allow optometrists to perform sensitive and complicated eye surgeries. “Eye surgery should only be performed by trained eye surgeons who have attended medical school and completed a nationally accredited residency program, honing our surgical skills under supervision for at least eight years,” said Jessica McNally, M.D. an experienced Vermont eye surgeon and president of the Vermont Ophthalmological Society.

The difference between an ophthalmologist and an optometrist is not well understood. In fact, a recent national survey revealed that the majority of people either aren't sure or think optometrists are medical doctors and surgeons. This is not the case. The training between ophthalmologists and optometrists is very different. All ophthalmologists are physicians (medical doctors) and surgeons. They attend four years of medical school and complete a four-year supervised, hands-on surgical residency program. Optometrists complete a four-year optometry program with no required further training and are not medical doctors or surgeons.

As part of a national drive to expand their business, the Vermont optometry lobby is pushing to lower safety standards, making the false claim that there are not enough ophthalmologists to take care of patient needs. “In Vermont we are extremely fortunate in that we have enough ophthalmologists to provide all scalpel and laser surgical care in and around the eye. If a Vermont patient needs urgent eye surgery, they can get the care they need right away from a trained physician surgeon,” added McNally.

A recent report from the Vermont Office of Professional Regulation (OPR) on the controversy reveals the weakness of the optometry lobby's key claims. The report concludes: “*OPR is unable to determine whether expanding the optometric scope of practice would improve patient access to care.[fn pg 31]*” The report also invalidates the

claim that lowering safety standards would save patients money. *“OPR cannot determine the impact expansion of the optometric scope of practice would have on costs.[fn pg 34]”*

The OPR report proposes an unprecedented expansion of optometry practice into both scalpel and laser eye surgery, justifying its recommendation by constructing woefully inadequate training requirements.

Vermont ophthalmologists plan to vigorously oppose any bill in the Legislature that risks patient safety. Foreshadowing her group’s intentions, Dr McNally stated, “Our eyes are one of the most sensitive and precious organs in our body. We will not remain silent as our lawmakers consider allowing optometrists, who have no standardized surgical training, to perform scalpel and laser eye surgeries on vulnerable Vermonters.”

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The Vermont Ophthalmological Society is a membership organization of Vermont Ophthalmologists dedicated to ensuring patients have access to safe and high quality eye care.