

COLLEGE OF OPTICIANS OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

# Guidelines for Prevention of Sexual Abuse

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Patient Relations Committee

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## Guidelines for Prevention of Sexual Abuse

### Introduction

This guide has been developed to act as resource for the registrants of the College of Opticians of British Columbia (COBC). This guide was developed by the Patient Relations Committee to meet the requirements of the *Health Professions Act (HPA)* as defined in Section 16(2).

### Philosophy

The COBC is committed to providing opticians with the information and resources that they need to assist them in ensuring that patients are always treated with the highest level of professionalism and care.

The optician/patient relationship is based on mutual trust and respect. Any form of sexual abuse of a patient by a registrant is considered to be a betrayal of that trust. The COBC has a policy of “**zero-tolerance**” pertaining to sexual abuse and harassment of patients, clients and co-workers during the practice of opticianry. Such professional misconduct by any registrants, providing any type of opticianry care, in any practice setting will not be tolerated by the COBC.

## Guidelines for Prevention of Sexual Abuse

### Professional Boundaries

It is the individual responsibility of each optician to maintain appropriate professional boundaries. Professional boundaries are the limits between where a professional relationship ends and a non-professional relationship begins. It is up to the optician to use their professional judgment to determine when a relationship has exceeded professional boundaries. The **optician is held responsible for any occurrence of abuse**. This is true even if the patient takes the initiative to change the relationship.

### How to Keep it Professional

There are a number of things an optician can do to ensure the development of a strictly professional relationship. Some examples are:

- Addressing the patient by his or her preferred name or title.
- Introducing yourself and explaining what your role is.
- Explaining the purpose of the services you are going to provide.
- Dressing in an appropriate fashion.
- Wearing name tags.
- Maintaining transparent practices for all patients.

### Warning Signs for Boundary Crossing

Some warning signs which may indicate the blurring or crossing of professional boundaries are:

- Giving or receiving gifts, especially expensive gifts or those of a personal nature.
- Excessive telephone conversations with patients which are not required for treatment.
- Reducing or waiving fees in exchange for other considerations.
- Deliberately scheduling an appointment with a patient when you know no one else will be there.
- Disclosing personal problems to a patient.
- Giving preferential treatment to certain patient.

### Have I Crossed a Boundary?

Ask yourself these questions:

- Would I tell another optician what I have done?
- Would I tell the COBC what I have done?
- Am I being clear and honest?
- Could the patient misunderstand my actions?
- Did I have unnecessary physical contact with the patient?

### Interactions with Patients

Opticians must be careful during their interactions with patients. They must ensure that their behavior is not misinterpreted. Opticians should be aware of how their behavior may be perceived by patients, as well as by anyone who may observe or overhear the interaction.

#### *Speaking*

An optician must be aware of the way they convey information to their patients. The words chosen are as important as the manner they are spoken in. When speaking with patients try to:

- Be sensitive to words that could cause misunderstanding.
- Be honest and straightforward.
- Use tact and consideration.
- Know when to contact an interpreter.

#### *Listening*

Good communication is a partnership and listening skills are just as important as speaking skills. Without effective listening skills the ability to communicate is considerably lessened. An optician must be able to listen effectively to their patient. By learning to listen effectively you can learn to modify your speech to match the needs of the patient. When listening to a patient the optician should:

- Observe a patient's nonverbal communication signals.
- Rephrase what the patient said, if necessary.
- Ask for clarification.
- Be mindful of any discomfort that is expressed, verbally or non-verbally, by the patient.

#### *Body Language*

Body language is the nonverbal component of language. It can convey as much or more than the words that go along with it. Patients may misunderstand the message if body

language contradicts what is being said. When interacting with a patient it is important that the optician:

- Maintain the appropriate eye contact.
- Use physical gestures carefully.
- Convey concern and empathy with the appropriate facial expressions.
- Respect the patient's personal space.

### *Touching and Other Physical Contact*

Any physical contact with a patient must be appropriate to the services that an optician provides. Patients should be offered choices in regards to how and who by they are touched. Some physical contact that is common in Western culture, such as a handshake, can be interpreted by members of other cultures as unsolicited physical contact that is intrusive and/or sexually abusive. Some patients are often offended by any uninvited touching, where such physical contact might be as seemingly innocent as touching the ears to adjust the eyeglass frames. When it is necessary to touch a patient for treatment or services the optician should always:

- Obtain the patient's consent.
- Explain why, where, and when you need to touch the patient prior to doing so.
- Respect, as much as possible, the patient's personal sense of space.
- Provide reassurance and explanations throughout the assessment.
- Acknowledge that the patient has the right to change his/her mind.

### Cultural Sensitivity

Today's society is culturally diverse. Boundaries may be different for each person depending upon their age, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, physical differences and/or socio-economic background. It is important to learn about and understand how these differences may affect the optician/patient relationship. Lack of knowledge regarding cultural and other differences may cause a patient unnecessary discomfort and embarrassment and lead to misunderstandings between the optician and patient. Opticians may find that it is helpful to ask a patient what type of contact and interaction is acceptable and what is not. In some cases, a patient may wish to have his or her care transferred to an optician of a different sex. A patient may also wish to have an additional health care worker (e.g. someone the patient knows and trusts) or a family member present during an assessment or fitting.

### Additional Considerations

- Record in the patient's file any propositions and/or requests from a patient which you feel may be unacceptable within the patient/optician relationship.

- Schedule appointments with patients during normal business hours. If appointments must be made before or after business hours then make all reasonable attempts to ensure that another staff person, or third party, is present.
- Incorporate transparent windows and open-door environments where possible.