

Tomorrow you will be discussing S. 64, the bill that would expand surgical scope for VT optometrists. I know you have heard all of the testimony and have heard from many concerned parties on each side. You have heard from the optometric group that surgery can be performed by optometrists safely and effectively, and that this has been modeled in other states across the country.

I don't want to repeat a lot of very valid arguments that my MD counterparts have already made, but would just want to highlight a few points for consideration:

1.) Access to care: Optometrists would argue that access to care is scarce here, and that additional cost is incurred by referring a patient, already at their office, to an ophthalmologist for treatment. While this is a valid point, it behooves us to remember that convenience cannot surpass clinical judgement. My colleagues have presented examples of individuals referred for surgery who did not need it, or in some cases, where it might even be contraindicated. As important as surgical skills are, selection of the appropriate patient is more important, not just from a safety perspective, but from a patient satisfaction and a financial perspective. I can see the scenario playing out whereby an Optometric practice, having purchased an ophthalmic laser for \$90,000, now must pay for the equipment by doing surgery. The cost is the same whether I do it or they do it. The difference is, I am more selective than many of my referring optometrists are. Listening to the patient in person often elicits a history different than purported symptoms were stated to be on the referral.

2.) I would argue that access to care for Optometry services is lacking. I have difficulty finding Optometrists for patients looking to establish care for contacts or glasses, as I do not furnish these services as a medical and surgical practitioner. I do not understand how there is all of a sudden access for laser surgery, but not access for glasses and contact lens appointments. These are the pain points I hear from Vermonters. Especially those with Vision Plans purchased through their insurers. Frankly, I haven't heard one time from patients that they 'wished their optometrist could do surgery on them.' This would be a bizarre statement in my opinion.

3.) Access to Emergency Care: Ophthalmologists take call for their patients 24/7/365. I have received numerous calls from patients of optometric practices over the years who's optometrists are "out for vacation". I am never told about such vacations and have never approved covering optometric practices, with a few notable exceptions. I am often told by these patients to "call Dr. Brophrey" or "go to the Emergency Room" after hours for emergency care. The optometrists have not advanced a plan, to my knowledge, detailing how they plan to cover their practices 24 hours per day if they begin to offer surgical eye care. Problems will fall - as they always do - to the experienced eye MD's.

I have invited the Senators from my own county to come to my office, to shadow patients having eye surgery, and to sit in on the conversations I have with patients who are referred for surgical procedures. I have received no acceptances for these overtures, and in fact, both of the Senators have signed on to sponsor this bill. Previously, Senator Brock had told me numerous times in personal conversations that "The only person doing

surgery on my eye will be one of your guys". I called Senator Brock to discuss this apparent shift in thinking and could not get a solid reasoning for this based on the facts. I am disappointed that the Senators in my district simply just don't understand what is at stake. To be honest, I doubt Senator Brock will actually seek out an optometrist for his eye surgery despite his co-sponsoring of the bill. I have invited any Vermont lawmaker to let me know if they would like to be the 20th, or 50th, not to mention the first, real patient to have laser surgery by an optometrist in Vermont. Again, crickets.

What has been allowed to come to pass in other states does not make it right for Vermont. The optometrists I work with on a daily basis are wonderful colleagues, and many of whom I regard as personal friends. They provide a necessary service to our citizens. And, there has to be creative ways for us all to work more collaboratively to provide better care for Vermonters. I have advanced ideas to local optometric colleagues about sharing employment for a new optometric hire. In fact, I have even offered to help with recruitment costs.

But collectively, I do not see the experience, the medical knowledge, or certainly the training amongst this group of professionals to do surgery or to make appropriate decisions about who has surgery. Surgery is an art as much as a science and it is learned - sometimes painfully - through countless years of training and working with real patients.

To become a surgeon requires medical school and years of residency training. You wouldn't want any less for yourself or your family. Why expect the public at large - who is largely uninformed about the issue - to be OK with it?

I hope you all make the right decision collectively for Vermont. I really do appreciate all of your hard work at a citizen leader for Vermont.

With Respect,

Gregory J Brophey, MD, FACS
Northwestern Medical Center
St. Albans, VT