GOC/COVID/09

Date of statement: 16 April 2020 (updated 1 May 2020)

General Optical Council (GOC) statement on verification of contact lens specifications during COVID-19 emergency

1. In these extraordinary times, we are fortunate that in all four countries of the United Kingdom we have a group of exceptionally well qualified eye care professionals on whom the general public and fellow healthcare professionals can rely. Uncertain times mean that our registrants may be called upon to work at the limits of their scope of practice and vary their practice for protracted periods of time and in challenging circumstances. While registrants are encouraged to work up to the limits of their competence, refresher training and/or supervision may be needed.

2. In this statement we hope to reassure our registrants that when they act in good conscience, for the public benefit, exercising professional judgement in all of the circumstances that apply, we will support them.

3. Along with all other healthcare regulators, we have signed a joint regulatory statement which acknowledges that registrants will need to act differently and deliver care in different ways during the COVID-19 emergency in line with Government and public health guidance. We will take account of this in fulfilling our regulatory functions along with the following statement in response to a question regarding whether it is necessary for contact lens specifications to be verified before supplying these in the current environment.

4. The COVID-19 emergency has seen some optical practices closing and staff either furloughed or redeployed elsewhere in the healthcare system. This has meant that in some cases, obtaining patient records to verify contact lens specifications has become more difficult. The intention behind this statement is to relax enforcement of the legislation around verification of contact lens specifications to ensure that prescription contact lenses can continue to be supplied to patients remotely during the emergency period. It will also help ensure that patients do not run out of contact lenses or re-use lenses where it is inappropriate to do so. This will also ensure that patients are able to obtain contact lenses through businesses operating within UK law (regardless of whether they are registered with the GOC), rather than being forced to resort to online businesses operating outside UK law where the same standards may not apply.

5. The relevant legal requirements are set out below.

Legal requirements

6. In order to be supplied with contact lenses, the patient must have an in-date contact lens specification which has been issued following a contact lens fitting/check. Where the sale is being made under the general direction (rather than supervision) of a registrant, and an original of the contact lens specification is not provided, section 27(3)(ii) of the Opticians Act 1989 requires the specification information or a copy of the specification to be verified with the person who provided the original specification.

7. It should be noted that prescription contact lenses can be supplied without verification of a contact lens specification where:

    - the sale is being made by, or under the supervision of, a registered optometrist, registered dispensing optician or registered medical practitioner; or
    - the supplier is in possession of the original contact lens specification.

8. Zero powered contact lenses can be supplied only by, or under the supervision (i.e. not under the general direction) of, a registered optometrist, registered dispensing optician or registered medical practitioner.

Exercising professional judgement during the COVID-19 emergency

9. During the COVID-19 emergency period, registrants overseeing the supply of contact lenses under general direction should arrange for reasonable attempts to be made to contact the person who provided the original specification in order to verify it (where they do not have the original specification). If these attempts are not successful (e.g. because the practice is closed or the individual is not working), they should use their professional judgement to decide on the best course of action, which may include providing contact lenses without verifying the specification.

10. In making this judgement, registrants should take account of:

    - the ability to contact the person who provided the original contact lens specification in a timely manner;
    - the ability to access the patient's contact lens records in a timely manner e.g. the practice of the person who provided the original specification may be open and able to provide confirmation, even if that individual is not available;
    - public health advice at the time in question e.g. advice about who should stay at home, the vulnerability of the patient, and how much longer the emergency period is likely to last;
    - the urgency of the order balanced against the risks to the patient of supplying without verifying the contact lens specification;
    - relevant clinical advice, including advice from the professional bodies specific to the COVID-19 emergency period;

- any previous clinical knowledge of or orders from the patient (e.g. if a contact lens specification has previously been verified that is similar to the current one); and
- the nature of any specific clinical risks, if known.

11. Where a registrant makes a decision to supply contact lenses without verifying the specification they must:
    - carefully consider the quantity of contact lenses supplied;
    - inform the patient that the specification has not been verified in accordance with legislative requirements; and
    - provide the patient with appropriate aftercare advice.

Recording your decisions

12. Registrants must make a note of their decisions, and the reasons for their decisions, including the duration of any supply of contact lenses and general advice to patients about safe supply, wear and aftercare. The note should be made directly in the patient records, or where this is not possible, the patient records should be updated at the earliest available opportunity.

The GOC will keep this statement under review

13. Next routine review due: not later than 31 January 2021[1].

[1] This statement was reviewed on 1 June and 9 July 2020 and no changes were made other than to the review date in paragraph 13.