

ECOO

MEMBER ARTICLE



Polskie Towarzystwo Optometrii i Optyki (PTOO)

Polish Optometric Association

By Konrad Abramczuk

REGULATION OF THE OPTOMETRIC PROFESSION IN POLAND

Background

The year 2023 proved to be a landmark in the history of Polish optometry. After more than 25 years of effort, at the end of September 2023 the Law on Certain Medical Professions (*Ustawa o niektórych zawodach medycznych*) was published in the Journal of Laws (*Dz. U. z 2023 r. poz 1972*), which included the regulation and rules for the optometric profession. Thus, the profession of optometrist is finally becoming a regulated medical profession, which means that for the first time it is fully entering the National Healthcare System (*Narodowy Fundusz Zdrowia - NFZ*).

Before the legal Act, because of the very large curriculum differences between universities and in order to make it easier for patients to choose a specialist, the Polish Optometric Association introduced an internal numbering system for optometrists - the so-called Optometrist Number (NO) - on its own initiative many years ago. Individuals holding an Optometrist Number have completed a recommended course of study that prepares them to practise their profession and care for patients with visual impairment (in accordance with ECOO guidelines). However, it is worth noting at this point that the NO is not equivalent to a practising licence number, which means that it is not mandatory to have one.

Under this new Act, provisions have been prepared to regulate 16 professions that became fully-fledged medical professions from March 2024. The direct aim of the Act is to ensure that patients have access to qualified medical staff who continuously improve their qualifications and skills. It is also one of the first steps towards introducing these professions into state medical care.

The Act

The Law on Certain Medical Professions consists of 3 basic elements, which are the pillars of the legal entitlement of the regulated professions.

The first element is the definition of who can be admitted to practise a medical profession. As part of the Act, the Central Register of Persons Entitled to Perform a Medical Profession (rizm.ezdrowie.gov.pl) is established. Entry to the Register will only be granted to persons who:

- *have full public rights;*
- *have no criminal or civil record;*
- *have appropriate education in the field;*
- *have a good command of the Polish language, both spoken and written.ⁱ*

The Register will be open to patients. This means that anyone will be able to check whether the person carrying out their

examination has the necessary qualifications and has not had their professional rights restricted. Each person entered in the Register will have an individual entry number. In contrast to the Optometrist Number described above, having an entry in the Register and using the entry number will be mandatory for all practising professionals. Importantly - entry in the Central Register will be the only tool that allows a specialist to title themselves an optometrist and provide optometric services. Persons practising as optometrists without the appropriate registration will be subject to criminal liability under the Act.

The second element is the introduction of compulsory continuing education for the specialist after graduation. Continuing education was one of the elements of the Act advocated by the profession. It is a well-known fact that the results of global scientific developments are constantly bringing about changes in both medicine and related sciences. This makes it necessary for every specialist to continuously improve his or her qualifications, to learn new examination methods or new therapeutic and corrective possibilities. According to the provision of the regulation, each specialist must collect 200 points during the educational period (5 years), including 120 points for the continuing education course. The remaining 80 points must be collected from other activities including:

- *conferences and professional meetings;*
- *classroom, online and in-service training courses;*
- *publications of articles, monographs and books of a popular science and scientific nature;*
- *defence of academic titles including doctoral (Ph.D), post-doctoral (DSc.)ⁱⁱ and professorial (Prof.);*
- *others.*

The third element of the law is the introduction of criminal provisions and the definition of professional misconduct. The aim of such a measure is primarily to protect patients from dishonest practices and violations of the ethics of the profession. A Code of Ethics for Optometrists has been available for many years on the website of the Polish Optometric Association, modelled on similar documents in force around the world. The Code is a set of guidelines for conduct that every optometrist should follow in their daily work. In addition, along with the provisions of the Act, an obligation for professionals to comply with the provisions of the Act on Patient Rights is introduced. As a result, any patient who has legitimate objections to a specialist's conduct under the provisions of the new Act will be able to file a notice with the newly established Professional Liability Commission. At present, the Executive Committee and the Optometry Ethics Committee of the PTOO receive more than a dozen complaints per year against persons unreliably performing

professional activities assigned to optometrists or people doing refraction. In our opinion, this shows how important it is from the patients' point of view to create and operate such a committee, directly enforcing the provisions of the Act and the accompanying documents. It is worth pointing out here, however, that so far the complaints rarely concern persons with an Optometrist Number assigned.

Conclusion

Currently, representatives of the Polish Optometric Association, in consultation with the Ministry of Health, are working on further documents for the Act. Polish optometrists are still waiting for the publication of implementing acts, i.e. regulations, fully defining professional activities. We wish these provisions to be beneficial not only for the optometric community and related professions, but, above all, for patients.

The law is the most important element we have been waiting for as eye care professionals. First and foremost, it gives us the opportunity to equalise the levels of education at Polish universities and align the curricula with uniform requirements, raise the quality of the services currently provided, and protect our professional title. In addition, it shows us the goals for the further development of optometry and gives us a basis for further regulation in the future and for seeking to expand our skills in postgraduate education. In

addition, the opportunities that will be opened up by the direct integration of optometrists into the publicly funded healthcare system and our taking over of eye

care prevention is what both patients and other professionals are waiting for.

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ⁱEvidenced by a declaration under penalty of perjury in legal documents.

ⁱⁱIn the Polish Higher Education System, the post-doctoral degree (DSc. - dr hab. - doktor habilitowany) and professor (Prof. - Prof. zw. - Profesor zwyczajny) are academic titles. They are gained on the basis of academic achievement and the presentation of the necessary scientific dissertation. Gradation of titles:
Bachelor (Lic.) → Master (Mgr) → Ph.D. (Dr) → DSc. (Dr hab.) → Prof. (Prof. zw.)