



Proposed legislation puts New Jerseyans' eyes at risk | Opinion

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By Herb Conaway, MD

When a patient in New Jersey undergoes a surgical procedure, they trust that the person holding the scalpel or controlling the laser is a licensed medical doctor and surgeon with years of appropriate education, training, and experience in their specialty.

But legislation being pushed in Trenton right now would authorize personnel that are not medical doctors and not surgeons to perform highly delicate eye surgeries using scalpels and lasers. Current medical safety regulations limit these procedures to being performed by ophthalmologists – medical doctors that are trained eye surgeons. New Jerseyans deserve this protection, and thus, existing law should be maintained to protect patient safety.

Just as you should expect that only a surgically trained orthopedic doctor would perform a knee surgery or a urologist perform another office-based procedure like a vasectomy, you should have no less standard of care for your eyes. No one should unknowingly take on the risk of life-altering complications because the person performing the surgery was allowed to perform the procedure despite not having the necessary education, training, and skills.

Yet, if passed into law, [this bill](#) would dramatically lower the quality and safety standards of surgical eye care in New Jersey and potentially jeopardize patients' eyesight by allowing optometrists -- who are not medical doctors or trained surgeons -- to perform surgery on and around the eye.

Ophthalmologists complete a minimum of eight years of schooling followed by four years of residency training. This training focusses on diagnosing and treating all eye conditions, and on performing procedures such as laser surgery on live patients under the direct supervision of a teaching ophthalmologist.

Meanwhile, optometrists are certified with as little as two years of college and four years of optometry school. They typically provide primary vision care, correcting vision problems with glasses, and managing various vision changes. Optometrists do not receive the proper medical education and training to safely perform eye surgeries.

Alarming, [this bill](#) would enable New Jersey optometrists to perform eye surgeries -- including using lasers on the tissue inside the eyeball, injecting medication directly into the eyelid, and removing potentially cancerous lesions around the eye with a scalpel.

There are a few rural states that allow optometrists to perform some of these procedures, and their “surgical” training there consists of a 32-hour course of lectures and practice on models. It’s ludicrous to think a long weekend’s worth of lectures and simulations would make anyone an expert at safely performing surgery on and around the eye.

Supporters of this dangerous legislation say that it’s necessary to help expand access to eye care in the state, yet New Jersey faces no access problem, given the number of ophthalmologists and the density of our population here in the Northeast.

Moreover, [research](#) from one of the few outlier states that have loosened surgical standards shows that allowing optometrists to perform eye surgeries led to increased costs for patients.

Notably, trabeculectomy surgeries -- a specific kind of glaucoma laser surgery that this legislation would allow -- had an 189% higher risk of needing to be repeated when performed by an optometrist as opposed to an ophthalmologist.

More risks, more harm, more surgeries, more costs. That’s what we can expect if optometrists are granted the power to operate on New Jerseyans’ eyes.

As a medical doctor, I can tell you that surgery is not just cutting with a scalpel or directing a laser; it includes patient selection, patient education, taking a medical history, and perhaps most importantly, identifying and managing potential complications during procedures.

Patient outcomes are significantly impacted when an underqualified professional is confronted with the unknown, such as a cancerous lesion – or another unforeseen complication that requires a surgical fix. It is only through completing medical school, residency, and surgical experience that one is adequately prepared to understand and address potential risks and complications. When it comes to eye surgery, there are no “simple procedures.”

Assemblyman Herb Conaway, MD, received an undergraduate degree from Princeton University, a medical degree from Jefferson Medical College and a law degree from Rutgers Law School in Camden. He has served the 7th legislative district in Burlington County for 25 years and chairs the Assembly Health Committee.