

GOC/COVID/11

Date of statement: 6 July 2020 (updated 28 May 2021)

General Optical Council (GOC) statement on infection prevention and control during COVID-19 pandemic

1. This statement will apply in the **red**, **amber** and **green** phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, as defined by [The College of Optometrists' red-amber-green classification system](#).
2. 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. In addition, 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 pandemic in line with Government and public health guidance. We will take account of this in fulfilling our regulatory functions.

Purpose of statement

4. The purpose of this statement is to set out the importance of maintaining appropriate infection prevention and control (IPC) measures according to the phase of the pandemic. This could include best practice hand and respiratory hygiene, social distancing, cleaning and decontamination, and the use of appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE).
5. We recognise that from time to time there may be issues with the timely delivery and provision of appropriate PPE in some areas and that registrants may be concerned in cases where they are unable to access appropriate PPE when caring for patients.

External advice

6. The Government has issued [guidance on IPC](#), including specific guidance on PPE in primary care settings, as well as guidance for businesses to work safely¹. This is supported by guidance and advice from the NHS, and specific guidance from the professional bodies (including The College of Optometrists² and the Association of British Dispensing Opticians (ABDO)³). We have

¹ England: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19>

Northern Ireland: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/coronavirus-workplace-safety-guidance-and-priority-sector-list-published>

Scotland: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-returning-to-work/>

Wales: <https://gov.wales/keep-wales-safe-work>

² <https://www.college-optometrists.org/the-college/media-hub/news-listing/primary-eyecare-covid-19-guidance-amber-phase.html>

³ <https://www.abdo.org.uk/coronavirus/>

provided links but registrants should always check that they are viewing the most up to date guidance. Links for where to go for guidance in each of the nations are available on our [website](#).

Standards

7. Our standards set out the key principles that registrants must follow to keep themselves, those they lead or manage, and those they care for safe. The standards are as follows:
 - business registrants: [Standards for Optical Businesses](#) – standards particularly relevant to this statement are standard 1.1 (patients can expect to be safe in your care), standard 1.2 (patient care is delivered in a suitable environment) and standard 3.1 (your staff are able to exercise their professional judgement);
 - optometrists and dispensing opticians: [Standards of Practice for Optometrists and Dispensing Opticians](#) – standards particularly relevant to this statement are standard 11 (protect and safeguard patients, colleagues and others from harm) and standard 12 (ensure a safe environment for your patients); and
 - student registrants: [Standards for Optical Students](#) – standards particularly relevant to this statement are standard 10 (protect and safeguard patients, colleagues and others from harm) and standard 11 (ensure a safe environment for your patients).
8. We also set education standards regarding appropriate placement provision within our accreditation and quality assurance handbooks⁴.

Responsibilities of registrants in exercising professional judgement

9. The COVID-19 pandemic requires a systems response, with individual and business registrants working together to develop and ensure compliance with IPC measures to minimise risk of virus transmission while providing eye care safely.
10. For the benefit of patients and the public we would expect all optical businesses and other practices, such as university clinics, to meet the requirements set out in this statement, regardless of whether or not they are currently registered with us.

Business registrants

11. Standard 1.2 of [Standards for Optical Businesses](#) requires that business registrants ensure patient care is delivered in a suitable environment, which includes references to infection control and care requirements, and preparedness to deal with an emergency situation. Business registrants must therefore ensure compliance with IPC procedures in line with Government

⁴ https://www.optical.org/en/Education/Approving_courses/index.cfm

guidance and keep their patients and staff safe. Further information about the standard can be found on our website:

<https://standards.optical.org/standards/patient-care-is-delivered-in-a-suitable-environment/>

12. It is the responsibility of employers to ensure appropriate IPC systems are in place including:
 - compliance with self-isolation guidance, social distancing, best practice hand and respiratory hygiene;
 - compliance with cleaning and disinfection advice, including ensuring that appointment times are sufficient for this to take place; and
 - the provision of appropriate PPE and ensuring that employees are trained in how to use it correctly (particular attention should be given to the guidance around whether PPE is intended for single or sessional use).
13. Where it is not possible for the employer to ensure appropriate IPC systems are in place, optometrists, dispensing opticians and student registrants should not be expected to see a patient. Employers may wish to consider working with staff to find alternative solutions, for example, introducing new IPC procedures or modifying existing procedures to aid compliance.

Individual registrants

14. It is the responsibility of optometrists, dispensing opticians and student registrants to comply with local IPC systems, which includes determining the appropriate PPE to use when seeing patients and how to use it correctly, as well as adhering to cleaning and disinfection and other protocols to reduce the risk of virus transmission. Registrants should always have regard to this guidance when in the practice, not just when with patients and members of the public.
15. Where there is a risk of non-compliance with IPC guidance, registrants should not see the patient and should use their professional judgement in deciding on the best course of action. They may wish to consider:
 - alerting their employer⁵, supervisor or placement provider to the lack of compliance with IPC (e.g. not having access to appropriate PPE or not using it correctly, not having access to, or sufficient time to use, appropriate IPC materials, or not having the ability to socially distance) and agree the actions to be taken;
 - whether treatment can be delayed or provided differently (e.g. remotely); and

⁵ Registrants will need to consider which member of staff in their employer is most appropriate to speak to.

- referring or signposting the patient⁶ to another practice that does have access to appropriate PPE, IPC materials or the ability to socially distance.
16. Enhanced IPC procedure, including use of PPE, may have negative outcomes for certain types of patients who may not be able to clearly understand communications, or may be alarmed by changes in approach or the change of environment or the registrant wearing PPE. Types of patients this might affect include those who have difficulties with communications skills, hearing-impaired patients who lip-read, and younger patients or those with mental health difficulties. These may contribute to difficulties in completing the consultation satisfactorily. Registrants should adapt their communications and engagement with patients and their carers accordingly to mitigate some of these issues.

Recording decisions

17. As per usual practice, optometrists, dispensing opticians and student registrants must make a note of issues or decisions related to IPC if relevant. The note should be made directly in the patient records where this is a patient specific decision. Where this is not possible, the patient records should be updated at the earliest available opportunity.
18. Decisions by business registrants relating to risk assessments, standard practice or operating procedures should be appropriately documented in an auditable format.

⁶ Standard 12.4.3 of the *Standards of Practice for Optometrists and Dispensing Opticians*