

VA Rescinds Policy Denying Veteran Access to Laser Eye Procedures Provided by Doctors of Optometry

Policy Update Brings Department in Closer Alignment with All Other Federal and Private Payers, Affords Doctors of Optometry the Opportunity to More Fully Use Education and Training to Provide the Greatest Care Possible to Those Who Have Borne the Battle

In August 2020, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) rescinded a policy that for 15 years had denied veteran access to laser eye procedures provided by doctors of optometry at VA facilities.

The laser policy was created in 2004, after organized ophthalmology began expressing growing concerns that an increasing number of states would be adding laser procedures to optometrists' scope of practice. In 2005, VA clarified that its laser directive was created for reasons other than concerns over patient outcomes or safety.

The VA policy reversal came after concerned U.S. House members wrote VA demanding that veterans in their states have the same access to therapeutic laser eye procedures performed by doctors of optometry that non-veterans now enjoy.

After rescinding the policy, VA updated its directive governing both optometrists and ophthalmologists (VHA Eye and Vision Care) indicating that the latter

are currently the providers of laser eye procedures - setting a pathway for doctors of optometry to gain the necessary VA credentialing and privileging to provide laser care to veterans.

Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration
Washington, DC 20420

VHA DIRECTIVE 1132
Transmittal Sheet
May 27, 2020

PERFORMANCE OF THERAPEUTIC LASER EYE PROCEDURES IN VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION FACILITIES

- 1. REASON FOR ISSUE:** This Veterans Health Administration (VHA) directive specifies the requirements to perform therapeutic laser eye procedures at Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical facilities.
- 2. SUMMARY OF MAJOR CHANGES:** This directive adds background information in paragraph 2, adds definitions in paragraph 3, updates responsibilities for VHA senior leaders in paragraph 4, and added mandatory training in paragraph 7.
- 3. RELATED ISSUES:** VHA Directive 1121, VHA Eye and Vision Care, dated October 2, 2019.
- 4. RESPONSIBLE OFFICE:** The Office of Specialty Care Services (10P11) is responsible for the content of this directive. Questions may be referred to 202-461-7120.
- 5. RESCISSION:** VHA Directive 1132, Performance of Therapeutic Laser Eye Procedures in Veterans Health Administration Facilities, dated May 5, 2015, is rescinded.
- 6. RECERTIFICATION:** This VHA directive is scheduled for recertification on or before the last working day of May 2025. This VHA directive will continue to serve as national VHA policy until it is recertified or rescinded.

BY DIRECTION OF THE OFFICE OF THE UNDER SECRETARY FOR HEALTH:

/s/ Lucille B. Beck, PhD.
Deputy Under Secretary for Health
for Policy and Services

NOTE: All references herein to VA and VHA documents incorporate by reference subsequent VA and VHA documents on the same or similar subject matter.

DISTRIBUTION: Emailed to the VHA Publications Distribution List on May 29, 2020.

RESCINDED

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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
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May 13, 2020

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary Wilkie,

We are writing to urge an immediate update to VHA Directive 1132, a misguided policy dating back to 2004. By unnecessarily restricting Veteran's health care facilities, this Directive impedes sight-saving care, eclipses states' rights, and deters rural access to care.

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We are writing to urge an immediate update to VHA Directive 1132, a misguided policy dating back to 2004. By unnecessarily restricting Veteran's health care facilities, this Directive impedes sight-saving care, eclipses states' rights, and deters rural access to care.

Non-veterans in states that allow Optometrists to perform more of the procedures outlined in their education and training are currently receiving better access to care than veterans in these states - solely due to VHA Directive 1132.

We are concerned that veterans are being denied access to essential eye health care services, including therapeutic laser eye procedures used to preserve sight in glaucoma patients and restore vision after cataract surgery, now being provided by Doctors of Optometry in their home communities only to veterans outside of the VA health care system.

Unfortunately, veterans are routinely being denied access to Selective Laser Trabeculotomy (SLT), a procedure used to lower intraocular pressure which can serve as an initial treatment or when eye drop medications are no longer keeping eye pressure enough or are causing significant side effects.

Veterans are also being denied access to Yttrium Aluminum-Garnet (YAG) laser capsulotomy, a procedure performed to treat cloudy vision that may remain after undergoing cataract eye surgery. SLT is a quick and painless outpatient procedure that, in most cases, is effective at restoring vision back to normal.

A growing number of states have recognized that SLT, YAG and other therapeutic laser eye procedures can safely and effectively be provided by local Doctors of Optometry, while offering much greater patient access to these treatments when and where patients need them - a particular benefit to rural patients. VHA Directive 1132, however, denies veterans the same access that the citizens of several states currently enjoy.

VHA Directive 1132 exists despite VA making clear at the time of enactment that the policy was not created to address any quality of care concerns. Further, the VA's Medical Inspector concluded in 2005 that VA Doctors of Optometry had been providing therapeutic laser eye procedures with "acceptable outcomes" and "no significant complications."

All veterans deserve access to safe, effective, and much needed care. As such, we urge an immediate update to VHA Directive 1132 allowing veteran access to therapeutic laser eye procedures provided by Doctors of Optometry approved to provide this care in states that have authorized them to do so.

Sincerely,

KEVIN HERN



The reversal now more closely aligns VA with

all other major federal and private payers. Medicare, Medicaid, and all major private insurers have for many years reimbursed for and ensured patient access to therapeutic laser eye care and other advanced procedures provided by doctors of optometry trained and licensed to do so.



The Indian Health Service, which similarly operates under a federal supremacy health care system, recognizes the ability

of appropriately licensed doctors of optometry to provide therapeutic laser eye and other procedures to patients and allows its optometrists to provide this care across state lines.



Veteran advocates have hailed the move, including American Veterans (AMVETS) - one of the nation's oldest,

most recognized veterans service organizations in the country.



On behalf of America's more than 20 million veterans and their families, AMVETS is proud of and applauds the VA for its recent and decisive move toward ensuring that more of our veterans have access to the full range of eye care services, including laser eye procedures, that doctors of optometry are ready, willing and fully able to provide," says Joe Chenelly, AMVETS national director. "AMVETS is committed to ensuring that our veterans have access to the care they need, where and when they need it—and we're happy that the VA is increasingly joining us in that mission."