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# Optometrists can do more to help patients. N.J. legislators should let them. | Opinion

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Dr. Jessica Garden writes in favor of legislation that would allow optometrists to perform certain in-office, non-invasive, minor laser and eye care procedures that can only be carried out by ophthalmologists under current law.



## By Jessica Garden

I was born and raised in New York. After graduating from optometry school in Pennsylvania, I knew I wanted to return to New York — or at least move closer to my family, most of whom live in the Tri-State area. I was offered a residency position at Omni Eye Services in New Jersey, and after spending a year intensely training and studying ocular disease, I realized that if I settled in New York, I wouldn't be able to practice to the full extent of my education, training and certification.

At the time of my decision, optometrists in New York had several practice limitations including being unable to prescribe oral medications. I felt it would be a disservice to myself and my patients to practice in a state where I couldn't offer the highest quality of care that I was trained to provide.

I chose to remain in New Jersey because I felt the state was dedicated to allowing optometrists, also recognized as Doctor of Optometry, the opportunity to practice at the highest level of their education and training. With the introduction of Assembly Bill 5445/[Senate Bill 3841](#), New Jersey's optometrists want to utilize that education and training to help address and improve health equity and access to vision and medical eye care for New Jersey's diverse populations, including our growing, aging population.

This legislation would allow optometrists to perform certain in-office, non-invasive, minor laser procedures to treat glaucoma and after-cataract surgery care as well as minor eye care procedures to remove styes and skin tags. All these procedures are taught in optometry school but under current New Jersey law, can be performed only by ophthalmologists and non-eye care advanced practice providers.

The bill would also expand vaccination and prescriptive authority for optometrists to further increase access to care for all citizens.

The need for this legislation is clear. Our healthcare system and workforce are strained, and we should use all available resources. There are nearly twice as many optometrists as ophthalmologists in New Jersey. Optometrists practice in all areas of the state including urban and underserved communities.

The procedures included in New Jersey's legislation have been performed more than 100,000 times by optometrists in other states and have been approved to be performed by optometrists within the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. They are not complex procedures and do not require general anesthesia, cutting, or injections into the eye.

Many of my patients have experienced delays in treatment, often waiting weeks or months to see an ophthalmologist for a procedure that in other states can be performed in-office by an optometrist. Take Mary, a 70-year-old patient who recently had cataract surgery. I've served as Mary's primary eye care doctor for years, building strong rapport and trust during that time.

Mary made an appointment to see me because her vision was blurry, a common condition after cataract surgery and one that can safely be treated with a minor, in-office laser procedure. I examined and evaluated her vision and explained the procedure — and then I had to refer her to an ophthalmologist. If New Jersey law were different, I would have been able to complete the procedure in my office that day. Instead, Mary had to deal with blurry vision for weeks while waiting for an appointment with an ophthalmologist.

Like medical doctors, dentists, and podiatrists, optometrists complete [a 4-year post-graduate](#), doctoral-level degree program, which includes extensive classroom, laboratory, and clinical training. Optometric training is focused solely on the eye and its components. This legislation will allow optometrists to provide care when and where it's needed and will lower costs by eliminating duplication of services and extra co-pays for redundant office visits. It also will reduce patient travel time and missed hours at work.

There are other benefits to modernizing the scope of practice for New Jersey's optometrists as well. It will align with current optometric education, training, and certification. And like my decision to practice in New Jersey, it will help attract and retain highly skilled, qualified optometrists to live and work in our state.

*Jessica Garden, O.D., is a graduate of Salus University in Pennsylvania. Her practice is in treating ocular disease at multiple OMNI Eye Services.*