



**ALBERTA OPTICIANS  
ASSOCIATION**

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Your Vision, Our Focus

**MEMBER GUIDE**

**2009**

Updated May 2009



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## 1. WHAT IS THE ALBERTA OPTICIANS ASSOCIATION (AOA)

It is a group of Opticians that the government has decided are responsible enough to govern themselves. It is an evolving group of people learning to make the most of their association. It is very much a democratic system in action, one member one vote. When you look at the whole it seems one person can make little difference but this association consists of 750 people. None are more powerful than any other. Some are just more active. You can make a difference!

This may sound like just another platitude but the purpose of this document is to demonstrate the reality of that statement.

## 2. WHAT IS THE ROLE OF ITS MEMBERS

### What can you expect from your association?

The first thing to be aware of is that the prime mandate of the AOA is to protect the public and therefore regulate Opticians. To make sure that Opticians understand and follow rules as laid out in the regulations, Bylaws, Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics.

The association must educate to keep the standards of education high and consistent and to develop continuing education. With the availability of the same course through much of Canada the traditional parameters have expanded to include the reciprocity. Consistency throughout the nation has suddenly become a reality.

The Opticians association must represent its members when dealing with other professional organizations. It must be able to effectively negotiate with government for contracts with Supports for Independence, AISH, Children's Services and Child Health Benefit, provincial health care agencies, Veterans Affairs and Native Affairs. Without consistency in a negotiator, the standard of contracts would not be what it is today.

Next is the role of mediation. This must be handled between Opticians and the general public. If it were to appear that this association could not deal with these complaints, the government would be forced to intervene on the public's behalf. The AOA must also have a vehicle to investigate professional conduct. The interactions may be between two opticians or involve another related group. Again these must be dealt with internally.

Dissemination of information is another area of importance addressed by the association. The individual Optician must be kept abreast of their rights and responsibilities. These areas are changing quite rapidly at this time, so this role has moved to the forefront. This information must also be made available to the general public. The public needs to be informed of the roles of Opticians in eye care.

The last area is litigation. The association is a vehicle of advice and support in times of trouble. The individual member should be able to request assistance in the form of information, moral support at a hearing or even financial assistance if they are fighting an injustice in the system that if corrected would benefit all opticians. This area also covers the writing or updating of regulation and bylaws. Legal consultation can be costly, but is necessary to insure that the rights of opticians are upheld.

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## **What can you give in return to your association?**

The first and foremost responsibility of an Optician is to attend the annual general meeting (AGM). This is your update on progress over the last year and your chance to vote on crucial issues leading to change, to ask questions and express opinions. You will also be asked to vote for your representatives for the next year. The decisions made by the council are binding on all membership.

You should be prepared to take a turn as a volunteer on the Council of Directors. You would be a representative and as such be prepared to fulfill this position to the best of your ability.

As a functioning member you must answer the call to write letters to your MLA or lobby government on issues which directly or indirectly affect Opticianry.

If a consumer or member of another association lodges a complaint against you, you must deal with it quickly and assist in finding a solution.

You must pay your dues promptly to help support the system and the projects you vote for. You must notify the Registrar immediately of any changes in name, business address or contact address. You must also maintain required levels of continuing education.

You must report any matters of professional misconduct and maintain required levels of liability insurance.

A member must also follow generally accepted standards of practice by maintaining proper instruments, equipment and space for servicing and caring for the client and by keeping records that date back at least three years after the last entry.

When thinking about what you can do for your association it may be something as simple as faxing a newspaper article to the office. This may be an issue you feel should be addressed or an article run only in your local paper. You may represent opticianry in your service group or at your local high school careers day. The possibilities are limitless and any input is valuable.

### **3. NORTHERN ALBERTA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY (NAIT)**

N.A.I.T is an educational institution, which has brought credibility to our course. It was originally designed by Alberta Opticians for NAIT to administrate the same as any other course they offer. N.A.I.T has become more to us than we first anticipated by becoming truly a partner in education. They have worked hard at improving the course by adding hands on training sessions and an edging lab. They have developed continuing education courses that include sight testing, ophthalmic review and the practicum supervisor's course. NAIT is also working on setting up various internet deliverable courses to improve access to our educational training.

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#### **4. HEALTH PROFESSIONS ACT**

In May 1999, the Alberta Legislature Assembly passed the Health Professions Act (HPA) to regulate all self-governing health professions. The legislation will require all health professional colleges to follow common rules to investigate complaints and set educational and practice standards for registered members.

The 30 health professions are being proclaimed under the HPA as they meet the requirements of new Bylaws, Regulations, etc. The Alberta Opticians Association may be proclaimed in 2008 or 2009. When this happens we will become the College of Opticians of Alberta (COA).

#### **5. THE COUNCIL OF DIRECTORS**

The Council of Directors consists of nine directors and three public members. The Executive Director /Registrar also attend all meetings. All meetings are open to the public.

##### **Public Members**

Public members are people appointed by the Government to attend meetings as outside observers. Law for any self-governing association requires attendance of these individuals. They have all the voting privileges of any other council member. They are paid by the Government to attend all council meetings and one must be a member of any regulatory committee that is set up.

##### **Complaints Director**

The purpose of the Complaints Director (CD) is to deal with complaints. These are complaints against an Optician or company filed with the AOA. Most of the consumer complaints received is misunderstandings concerning progressive lenses, coatings, company policy or warranties. In the case of this type of complaint the director is simply a mediator between Optician and consumer. The director must put aside personal feelings and deal with fact. The Optician or company involved is always allowed to present their side of the story.

If the Complaints Director contacts you, remember, the association is simply trying to find a solution, which will be acceptable to all parties involved. Understand that the director is also an optician.

If the complaint is more serious and deals with a professional practice problem the information is processed by the Complaints Director who must then decide if it needs to go before the discipline committee.

##### **Education**

The director of education's role is to act as a liaison for continuing education. The director keeps abreast of continuing education seminars, conventions and distance delivery formats to ensure that there is a diversity of information available to members. If members request education in certain areas or as technology changes the director will coordinate seminars to address these issues. This position depends on input from the members as to what type of education they require.

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Education also covers continuing education, which is mandatory after graduation. Twenty credits are required over a three-year period for an optician with a minimum of 12 eyeglass credits and an additional fifteen credits are required for a contact lens practitioner. These can be obtained at conventions, through product knowledge lectures put on by suppliers or through a variety of distance delivery formats set up by the AOA, NAIT or the Opticians Association of Canada (OAC). Also sometimes accepted are courses designed for ophthalmic or optometric assistants or ones received at conventions out of province or in the U.S.

### **Negotiations**

The Committee in charge of third party contracts is expected to handle negotiations with both the Federal and Provincial government for contracts with Supports for Independence, AISH, Children's Services and Child Health Benefit, provincial health care agencies, Veterans Affairs and Native Affairs. The Committee also negotiates contracts with the RCMP. Negotiation requires the attendance of meetings to draw up proposals and seek alternatives when cut backs are imposed. The success of these negotiations does not always get opticians more for contracts but keep us on a level playing field with other groups involved and usually limits the amount of reductions. This Committee also serves as a go between when answering members' questions on contracts and dealing with problems that come up relating to implementation. Because of the broad spectrum of this portfolio the assistance of the membership is valuable. This portfolio has been removed from the Council and set up as a separate committee under the Health Professions Act.

### **Disciplines**

This portfolio deals with problems or complaints related to professional practice. A committee is set up and must follow a set of very strict procedures. Discipline committees in all other associations follow these same guidelines. Discipline committees and practice review boards must consist of one public member, one elected council member and three other members in good standing. This director works closely with lawyers.

### **Practice Review**

This is a portfolio that will expand when the new regulations and bylaws came into effect under the HPA. It deals with accrediting continuing education, monitoring student supervision and reviewing the practice of opticianry. The director in this portfolio heads the Practice Review Committee. Since continuing education is now mandatory and rules are being enforced in the method of practicing, this portfolio will become even busier in the future. This portfolio is also developing protocols on how practice visits will be administered under the HPA.

### **Vice President**

The vice president must preside over meetings if the president is unable to attend and must be able to step in if the president cannot complete the term of office. The vice president assists and the President and will eventually take over when the president steps down. The vice president is a member of the Finance and Audit Committee. The vice president has signing authority.

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## **President**

The president must do more than preside over the council and committee meetings. The president is involved with each of the portfolios. The president signs cheques and minutes. The president is a member of all committees and signs certificates and diplomas. The NAIT advisory committee meetings require the president's attendance. The president also confers with the executive director on a regular basis and gives advice regarding tasks that require attention.

## **6. EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

The executive director is a part time paid position that was established to assist in administration. Until this position was activated the individual directors worked independently. It was difficult to coordinate projects and each director was spending excessive time on their volunteer positions. These positions became so time consuming it was difficult to find anyone with the time or the inclination to take them on. The executive director's position was set up to take some of the load off individual directors and to bring consistency and legitimacy to the Association. These concerns and more are being addressed.

The executive director prepares appropriate information on issues before the council and provides advice and support on all portfolios. This position works closely with other health professions and with the government on cross jurisdictional areas, works with other provincial and national opticianry groups on areas of common ground and works with NAIT to assure a healthy and productive relationship. The executive director handles document publication, consultations, the computer network and the implementation of new services for members. This position oversees the day-to-day operations of the AOA.

## **7. REGISTRAR**

This position will be split between the Complaints Director and the Executive Director under HPA. All complaints go to the complaints director and then the decision is made to dismiss the complaint, forward the complaint for investigation, to the discipline committee or to another association. For charges of unskilled practice and professional misconduct the Complaints Director may be the preliminary investigator or may appoint someone to investigate.

The registrar deals with all registration issues that are unpaid dues, suspension of licenses, reinstatement and accepting new members into the association. The registrar maintains the opticians and contact lens practitioners' register and tracks continuing education requirements. The registrar receives advice from the Prior Learning Assessment Committee that evaluates qualifications and equivalencies of licensing. This position is responsible for funds, reports on revenue and expenditures at each meeting and deals with the annual report. The registrar is a member of every regulatory committee and has signing authority. The registrar must be intimately familiar with all legislation governing opticians, Bylaws, Regulations and Standards of Practice.

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## 8. PRIVACY OFFICER

This position was instituted as a result of the enactment of provincial privacy legislation (January 1, 2004) known as, the *Personal Information Protection Act* (more renowned as “PIPA”). The legislation makes reference to the creation of an individual that would be equipped to answer inquires about personal information. This individual will be identified as the Privacy Officer. The Officer would be put in charge of privacy related issues. The Privacy Officer can be responsible for learning about the legislation, and ensuring that the organization has sufficient systems in place to ensure compliance. The individual would also be responsible for answering questions about the *Act* and for taking access requests and complaints under the *Act*. The privacy officer is identified on the web site at [www.albertaopticians.org](http://www.albertaopticians.org)

## 9. REGISTRATION ADMINISTRATOR/ EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT And AMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT

These positions are paid full-time positions. They will know if your dues have been paid, which forms to send you if you are a new member or if you need to change your address with the association. Duties include updating memberships, collecting dues, sending out invoices, posting all work orders to the computer and handling the financial transactions. The registration administrator is the member’s first contact with the office and as such is familiar with all issues the members may have questions about. The Executive Assistant is the assistant to the Executive Director and the Council of Directors. This positions deals with various board duties such meetings, education seminar promotion and conferences and developing the quarterly newsletter, The Eighth Line, as well as updating and editing the AOA website. The Administrative Assistant provides several different functions in the office as support to mainly the Registration Administrator, the main role of the Administrative Assistant it to track member continuing education credits, and also accreditation of the many courses submitted for credit to the office. The accounting position is part time and contracted out.

## 10. PRACTICAL EXAMINATION

Prior to 1992, the Professions and Occupations Bureau, a branch of the provincial government, examined opticians. The government therefore subsidized this examination. In 1992, when the association became self-regulating, the responsibility for examining was given to the University Coordinating Council (UCC), an independent licensing committee used by 22 professions. They determined who was eligible for examination and supervised examination procedures. They also approved training programs. This arms length method of licensing added credibility and eliminated the possibility of preferential treatment. The UCC was a requirement of government but was disbanded in 1999. The AOA now recognizes the (NACO) National Accreditation Committee of Opticians (National) examination.

This committee is not government funded and must support itself by charging examination fees. Each year approximately fifty students attempt the exam in July and ten in February. This examination is cost recovery and the cost is borne by the students being examined. If not successful, re-examination is possible up to three times before more upgrading may be required.

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## 11. THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The general meeting is held annually generally the first Sunday in May. It is a public forum to air grievances and to discuss and vote on important issues. In order to introduce a special motion to the agenda any twenty members in good standing may deliver written notice to the registrar thirty days before the meeting. This meeting is conducted much like a council of directors meeting. Old business is dealt with first, and then directors give a report, written in advance of the meeting, on their particular area. These reports include updated decisions made over the year and any progress in projects. Questions may be asked and are welcomed. The financial statement is reviewed and questions are answered. Any new business is discussed and voted on. The voting then takes place for new directors. With the new regulations and bylaws, 1997 was the first year proxy and mail in ballots were accepted to allow all members to be a part in such an important decision. With the introduction of the Health Professions Act we are hoping that on line voting by computer will be available to further make this vote accessible.

In order to attend the general meeting you must be a member of the association. Only practicing members may vote.

We encourage members to attend the AGM because this is where you find out more about what your association has been doing for you for the past year.

### **How Directors Are Chosen, Terms and Voting Procedures**

Director's terms are two years and three consecutive terms are permitted. These terms alternate each year so at each AGM 4 or five directors are elected. This allows for some consistency, as all board members are not replaced each year. A council member may be removed by a three quarters vote of council for conflict of interest or failing to attend to duties as a director. A council member may resign at any time with written notice.

The council decides from amongst their ranks who will hold the position of president and vice president for one year of their terms on the board. It is permissible for these positions to be held consecutively.

For each of the positions up for election names are requested in advance. All nominations must be submitted in writing at least ninety days before elections and be signed by the nominee and five other members in good standing. Ballots will be mailed out to each member at least thirty days before elections. To vote by proxy the ballot must be placed in a sealed envelope, signed on the outside and received before the close of the voting.

The AOA has been working over the past few years to align voting procedures with the HPA so that the effects of the transition will be minimal.

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## 12. HISTORY

The Alberta Opticians Association was founded in 1965. The association (then called The Alberta Guild of Ophthalmic Dispensers) was legislated by the government and Professions and Occupations was responsible for licensing. At that time, all apprentices had to be registered with Professions and Occupations. In 1992 the AOA became self-regulating and received the new name.

Becoming self-regulating meant re-writing the regulations and bylaws for the first time since 1985, developing continuing education and deciding on the specific number of continuing education credits necessary to keep licenses current. It meant dealing with complaints from inside and outside the association, having a recognized educational institution administer the course, and having an independent body supervise examinations. It also meant developing a Practice Review Committee and a Discipline Committee. Public members were required to be in attendance at board meetings and on all discipline committees. Self-regulating status has allowed opticianry in Alberta to be a fully functioning profession. This put opticians on the same level as the other eye care professions when dealing with Governments.

When the AOA became self-regulating in 1992 the Optician's Act had to be changed to deal with issues previously handled by the government. The association must now deal with all internal affairs like disciplining our own members and external matters such as interaction with other associations. This required the onerous task of rewriting the regulations and bylaws, a long and drawn out process that involved a lawyer's rewrite to incorporate legal language and ensure removal of all loopholes. It has been accomplished and was accepted by a vote of the general membership at the annual meeting in 1996. It is now being redone for the HPA.

## 13. RECENT ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- a) New Standards of Practice
- b) Regulations and bylaws under the HPA.
- c) Sight Testing.
- d) Reciprocity
- e) Health Professions Act

### a. New Standards of Practice

New Standards have been developed and are included in the New Member Package. They are a culmination of many years' effort and great amount of collaboration.

### b. Regulations and bylaws under the HPA

When regulations and bylaws were rewritten in 1996 we thought that would be it for a while. In 1999 the Government introduced us to The Health Professions Act. This meant rewriting regulations and bylaws again. That was so for all health professions. We didn't have quite as much work because our regulations and bylaws were at least up to date. This process of writing regulations and bylaws to be instituted under the HPA was completed and voted on at the AGM in 2003. At that time we thought all the changes would be completed before the end of 2003. Since this was not the case revisions to the bylaws to begin the changeover were voted on at the AGM in May of 2004. These are the bylaws we are operating under until the HPA comes into effect for us.

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### **c. Sight Testing**

This is a course being offered by NAIT. Though at present prescribing is outside the optician's scope of practice, knowing about it is valuable. We are not allowed to diagnose eye health problems, but knowing what they are and how they affect vision is important when selecting frames and lenses for the customer.

Sight testing allows us to understand the procedures involved in formulating a prescription and gives insight as to why changes occur and why even on the same day an RX can vary.

NAIT has just completed an extensive review and rewrite of their sight testing course. This is being offered as continuing education.

### **d. Reciprocity**

All provinces except Quebec have signed the Mutual Recognition Agreement (MRA). Even Quebec has agreed in principal that the training of opticians is substantially equivalent in all provinces. This means free movement of credentials across provincial borders in Canada. Examinations have been looked at and course material has been assessed to determine equivalencies. While this process is still ongoing the future is much more promising for license portability. In circumstances where an eyeglass optician wishes to move to Ontario or Quebec where there is only one license the eyeglass optician will have to upgrade but a provision has now been put into place to make the upgrade possible. This is a giant leap but we are still working toward a nationally recognized continuing education model.

### **e. Health Professions Act**

We are ready in that our regulations and bylaws are complete. We have adjusted our discipline process to align with the HPA and have begun to train people in other areas. We have begun the process of instituting Practice Visits through member consultation and now committee development. We continue to work on getting all areas ready to go under the HPA including database work and privacy analysis.

## **14. THE FUTURE**

Directions for change lie in the areas of:

- a) Sight Testing for Opticians
- b) Development of Internet Education and Continuing Education
- c) National Licenses
- d) Health Professions Act
- e) Committee Development
- f) On-Line Voting and Payments

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### **a) Sight Testing for Opticians**

The training is now in place and opticians are learning the principles of sight testing. The next step is to be in a position where practicing these skills is acceptable. The Alberta Opticians Association has asked the Government for an increase in scope of practice to include refraction. This process was begun in 1995 and we continue working towards this goal.

### **b) Development of Internet Education and Continuing Education**

It is a goal of the AOA to have continuing education credits available through our website and on CD Rom to accommodate those members who live in rural areas and the far north. The future will see more continuing education available in this mode.

### **c) National Licenses**

Labour mobility under the Free Trade Agreement states that mobility of the workforce is mandatory, which has pushed efforts for a national license forward. With the input of all the provinces in Canada this has been accomplished. We are now working toward national standards for continuing education

### **d) Health Professions Act**

The AOA may be proclaimed under the HPA in the next year. This will require more changes within the Association. The biggest impact will be the implementation of a Practice Review component and new committees that will have to be developed.

Under the HPA the name of the Alberta Opticians Association will become “College of Opticians of Alberta” (COA).



### **e) Committee Development**

It is always a goal of the AOA to keep member fees down. With the changes required when the HPA is proclaimed and the demands that are required for a changing and growing association we are always looking for members to work on committees. The more work that can be done at committee level the less it costs the association and the easier it is to keep dues down. It is much less expensive to reimburse members for their time and travel than it is to hire staff to do the work. Most importantly, our members are experts in what is required by opticians.

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## **f) On-Line Voting and Payments**

This is a service that we would like to offer. While it was attempted for a few years, it was found to be too expensive at the time. We are working on a new database and server system that will allow us to operate the secure website at a much reduced cost.

## **15. MEMBER BENEFITS**

For information on how your dues work for you please review the following:

- a. Discount Insurance Package
- b. Errors and Omissions Insurance (OAC)
- c. Website
- d. Newsletter
- e. Continuing Education
- f. Practicum Supervisor Training
- g. Safety Eyewear (Opticians Association of Canada)

### **a. Discount Insurance Package**

The AOA has developed a group insurance plan with Meloche Monnex. There are discounted rates on auto and home insurance. You can contact them at 1-800-339-1847 and make sure you indicate you are a member of the Alberta Opticians Association.

### **b. Errors and Omissions Insurance Opticians Association of Canada**

The Opticians Association of Canada has negotiated and offers Errors and Omissions Insurance for those members who employers do not cover their insurance. This insurance if purchased individually can be very expensive but as a group we get a much better rate. Please call their office for information on this program. Contact OAC for other benefits they offer.

### **c. Website**

The AOA maintains a website at [www.albertaopticians.org](http://www.albertaopticians.org). This is a valuable resource for information you need as an optician (refer to the Opticians Information section). This is also the where you can find out the latest news within the association and upcoming continuing education opportunities.

The website also hosts a classified ads section where help wanted is posted, opticians looking for work and equipment for sale. This service is free to members.

### **d. Newsletter**

The AOA produces a quarterly newsletter. This is a great information tool for members on what is going on in the Association, what is changing in the optical field, what continuing education courses are being offered, what you need to know that will affect your practice, classified ads and NAIT updates. We do take articles from the members and letters to the editor and or Executive Assistant are welcome.

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**e. Continuing Education**

New courses have been developed which give opticians all over the province equal access. The distance delivery format of videos began this process. NAIT now offers several large continuing education courses that allow a member to acquire all necessary points, for three years, at once. The Opticians Association of Canada (OAC) has also introduced a series of distance delivery modules. The development of the Practice review committee has allowed for a wide variety of courses from different sources to be evaluated and approved for credits

**f. Practicum Supervisors Training**

This course, developed by NAIT, is designed to help supervisors cope with training a student. Everyone has had supervisors. Some were a lot of help while others were not. This course will help to reduce the inequities in training future opticians. Please contact the AOA for information on this course. You also receive 10 EC credits for this home study course!

**g. Safety Eyewear**

The development and implementation of the safety eyewear program is important to the membership as an increase in association revenue.

Opticians involved in this program have access to contracts that until recently were exclusive to organizations which could offer central billing procedures. This program is now operated by the:

Opticians Association of Canada  
2607-83 Garry Street  
Winnipeg, MB R3C 4J9  
Ph: 1-800-847-3155  
Fax: 1-204-947-2519  
Website: [www.opticians.ca](http://www.opticians.ca)  
E-Mail: [canada@opticians.ca](mailto:canada@opticians.ca)

A large company with 5000 employees across western Canada will not accept billing from 1000 different sources requiring 1000 different cheques to be written. With the new simplified billing procedure, a company receives one bill each month from the association containing a breakdown of employees serviced. The association collects and distributes funds to the members involved. The bulk purchase of frames and lenses is also paid from these funds, so the optician only deals with the fitting fee designated by the contract.