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.


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.


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 rescind.

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.

CONTENTS

PERFORMANCE OF THERAPEUTIC LASER EYE PROCEDURES IN VETERANS
HEALTH ADMINISTRATION FACILITIES

1. PURPOSE ........................................................................................................................................... 1
2. BACKGROUND .................................................................................................................................... 1
3. DEFINITIONS ...................................................................................................................................... 1
4. POLICY ................................................................................................................................................ 2
5. RESPONSIBILITIES ............................................................................................................................. 2
6. CREDENTIALS FOR PERFORMING LASER EYE PROCEDURES ................................................. 4
7. TRAINING ............................................................................................................................................ 4
8. RECORDS MANAGEMENT .................................................................................................................. 4
9. REFERENCES ....................................................................................................................................... 4
PERFORMANCE OF THERAPEUTIC LASER EYE PROCEDURES IN VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION FACILITIES

1. PURPOSE

This Veterans Health Administration (VHA) directive specifies the requirements to perform therapeutic laser procedures of the eye and eyelids at Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical facilities. **AUTHORITY:** Title 38 United States Code (U.S.C.) 7301(b).

2. BACKGROUND

In February 2004, VHA Under Secretary for Health, Robert Roswell, MD, published a memorandum prohibiting laser eye surgery by optometrists within VHA in the best interests of Veterans. VHA issued the memorandum after learning that Oklahoma allowed laser eye surgery by optometrists within that State. Later the same year, VHA Acting Under Secretary for Health Jonathan Perlin, MD, PhD, approved two VHA policies: VHA Directive 2004-039, Therapeutic Laser Eye Procedures (which was rescinded on August 24, 2004 and immediately replaced) and VHA Directive 2004-045, Therapeutic Laser Eye Procedures (which was rescinded on December 17, 2004). These directives reversed the VHA Under Secretary for Health’s position. VHA Directive 2004-045 stated that optometrists with valid State certification could perform laser eye procedures but only under the supervision of a qualified ophthalmologist. This directive was replaced by VHA Directive 2004-070, Performance of Therapeutic Laser Eye Procedures in VHA Facilities, which stated that laser procedures within VHA may only be performed by ophthalmologists with the requisite training and expertise. This directive prohibited optometrists from performing laser eye procedures due to patient safety and programmatic risks. Since 2004, therapeutic laser eye procedures may be performed only by properly trained and credentialed ophthalmologists. Today, VHA maintains this policy as the standard of care throughout VHA for performing laser eye surgery procedures. Therapeutic laser eye procedures must only be performed by properly trained and credentialed ophthalmologists.

3. DEFINITIONS

a. **Ophthalmologist.** An ophthalmologist is a Medical Doctor (MD) or Doctor of Osteopathy (DO) who is licensed to independently provide primary, specialty, surgical, and laser eye care services. An ophthalmologist is medically trained and qualified to diagnose and treat all eye and visual system problems, deliver total eye care, and diagnose general diseases of the body. These treatments include, but are not limited to cataract surgery, diabetic retinopathy laser therapy, glaucoma treatment, trauma surgery, and macular degeneration injections. After baccalaureate education, ophthalmologists complete 4 years of medical school, 1 year of internship, 3 years of an ophthalmology residency including the management of complex ocular conditions and surgery, and often 1 to 2 years of additional fellowship training in a specific surgical specialty. All ophthalmologists within VHA are board certified or board eligible by the American Board of Ophthalmology.
b. **Therapeutic Laser Eye Procedure.** Therapeutic laser eye procedure is a surgical procedure using a medical grade laser that produces focused energy to treat a variety of eye conditions. Several types of lasers that treat human tissue with different types of light and with varying wavelengths are available within most VHA ophthalmology sections. Refractive laser surgery (LASIK, PRK) is not performed in VA medical facilities as these are elective procedures not covered by Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) or third-party payors. The laser beam can be used to disrupt tissue or membranes, destroy diseased retina to treat diabetic eye disease and sickle cell disease, create openings within the iris to reduce glaucoma, remove cloudy membranes after cataract surgery, treat retinal holes or tears, create incisions within the cornea to treat astigmatism or to make cataract surgery wounds, or to modify the refractive status of the eye. Risks of laser surgery include blurriness from inadvertent treatment of the retinal fovea, elevated intraocular pressure, or from bleeding, which may require medications or additional surgery. Laser burns of the cornea, lens or optic nerve may create a scar and permanent vision loss. Overtreatment can lead to scar tissue or retinal detachment with permanent vision loss.

4. **POLICY**

   It is VHA policy to ensure high-quality health care for Veterans. Therapeutic laser eye procedures must be performed only by appropriately credentialed and privileged ophthalmologists.

5. **RESPONSIBILITIES**

   a. **Under Secretary for Health.** The Under Secretary for Health is responsible for ensuring overall VHA compliance with this directive.

   b. **Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Operations and Management.** The Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Operations and Management is responsible for:

      (1) Communicating the contents of this directive to each of the Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISNs).

      (2) Ensuring that each VISN Director has the sufficient resources to fulfill the terms of this directive in all VA medical facilities that conduct laser eye treatments.

      (3) Providing oversight of VISNs to ensure compliance with this directive, relevant standards, and applicable regulations.

   c. **Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Policy and Services.** The Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Policy and Services is responsible for supporting the implementation and oversight of this directive across VHA.

   d. **Director, Office of Specialty Care Services.** The Director, Office of Specialty Care Service is responsible for:
(1) Determining the effectiveness and efficacy of this directive through oversight of compliance with this directive.

(2) Reviewing this directive for rescission or recertification no later than 6 months prior to the last working DATE. **NOTE:** The DATE is the last working day of the month, 5 years from the date of publication.

e. **Veterans Integrated Service Network Director.** Each VISN Director is responsible for ensuring VA medical facilities within the VISN comply with this directive.

f. **VA Medical Facility Director.** Each VA medical facility Director is responsible for:

(1) Providing oversight to ensure that pertinent VA medical center staff comply with this directive.

(2) Ensuring that privileges to perform laser eye procedures are granted to ophthalmologists who have completed the requirements as described in this directive.

g. **Chair, Professional Standards Board.** The Chair, Professional Standards Board (PSB) is responsible for delineating which laser surgery privileges should be granted to VA health care providers based on their level of training and experience.

h. **Chair, VA Medical Facility Laser Safety Committee.** The VA Medical Facility Laser Safety Committee typically consists of a Chairperson, Laser Safety Officer, representatives from Bioengineering and Occupational Health and representatives from all Services that perform laser surgery. The Chair, VA medical facility Laser Safety Committee is responsible for ensuring compliance with training requirements and safety rules and regulations (see paragraph 7).

i. **VA Medical Facility Ophthalmology Service or Section Chief.** Each VA medical facility ophthalmology Service or Section Chief is responsible for:

(1) Developing the delineation of privileges for care delivered within that specialty.

(2) Ensuring that appropriate resources are available to support those privileges.

(3) Ensuring that all ophthalmology laser users are current with annual laser safety training.

(4) Evaluating all ophthalmology laser users performance of selected laser procedures through Ongoing Professional Practice Evaluations (OPPE). The recommended minimum is evaluation every 6 months. **NOTE:** The on-going monitoring of privileged ophthalmologists, OPPE, is essential to confirm the quality of care delivered. This allows the VA medical facility to identify professional practice trends that impact the quality of care and patient safety. **See VHA Handbook 1100.19, Credentialing and Privileging, dated October 15, 2012.**
j. **VA Medical Facility Ophthalmologist.** Each VA medical facility ophthalmologist is responsible for ensuring their credentials and licensure are properly maintained according to their respective State laws.

6. **CREDENTIALS FOR PERFORMING LASER EYE PROCEDURES**

To independently perform laser eye procedures, ophthalmologists must have completed an accredited ophthalmology residency approved by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education or the American Medical or Osteopathic Association, have appropriate training and experience in therapeutic laser procedures in accordance with the credentialing and privileging procedures at the VA medical facility, and are board eligible or board certified by the American Board of Ophthalmology. Physicians who perform laser surgery must maintain currency in laser safety training provided within VA Talent Management System (TMS) (see paragraph 7). Ophthalmology residents are trained to perform laser eye surgery under supervision of an attending ophthalmologist who is credentialed and has current laser privileges at the VA medical facility.

7. **TRAINING**

The following initial and annual training is required for all VA medical facility laser users for credentialing and maintenance of laser privileges: VA Talent Management System (TMS) Laser Safety Training item # 3870739. **NOTE: For more information on Laser Safety Training, see www.tms.va.gov/SecureAuth35/. This is an internal VA Web site that is not available to the public.**

8. **RECORDS MANAGEMENT**

All records regardless of format (e.g., paper, electronic, electronic systems) created by this directive shall be managed per the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) approved records schedules found in VA Records Control Schedule 10-1. Questions regarding any aspect of records management should be addressed to the appropriate Records Manager or Records Liaison.

9. **REFERENCES**

a. 38 U.S.C. 7301(b).

