

Optometrists say new powers will improve eye care

Patients can now get prescriptions without visiting specialists

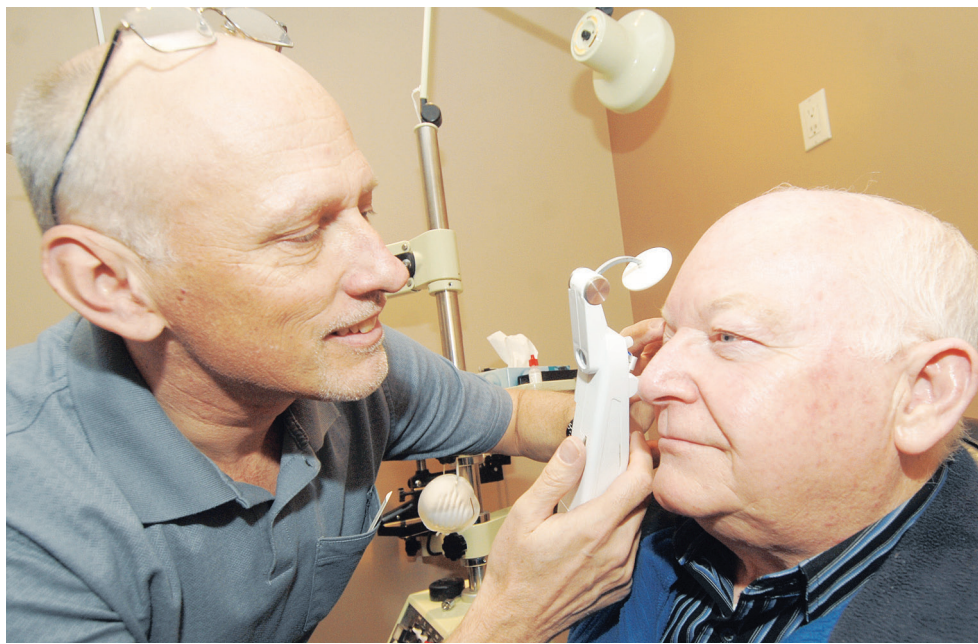
By **LISATALLYN**
Staff Writer

Patients with eye infections and even glaucoma can now get prescriptions from their optometrist instead of waiting to see their family doctor, or ophthalmologist or visiting a walk-in clinic. "It'll make life a lot easier," said Dr. John Mastronardi, president of the Ontario Association of Optometrists of the new powers that took effect last Thursday.

"The impetus is all about improving access for eye care," said Georgetown optometrist Dr. Ben Giddens. He said with no ophthalmologists working in Halton Hills, area patients have to go to Brampton, Orangeville or Mississauga if they need to see one.

Giddens said patients often have to wait to get an appointment with an ophthalmologist and "seniors often have to ask a family member for transportation."

The changes—which will ease pressures on family doctors and emergency rooms—have been four years in



Dr. Ben Giddens tests the pressure on patient Kent McClure's eyes.

Photo by Ted Brown

the making since the 2007 passage of the Health Systems Improvement Act, which gave optometrists the power to prescribe.

Since then, the association, the Ontario College of Optometrists and the health ministry have been working out the details and scope of the powers. They were recently improved by Premier Dalton McGuinty's cabinet.

"Most of our members have been educated and trained to prescribe med-

ications for years," said Georgetown optometrist Dr. Caroline Teske. "We are pleased that the Ontario government has made changes that will broaden access to medically necessary services across the province. We now can be the primary eye care providers for Ontario."

"This is better for patients," said Health Minister Deb Matthews.

Patient Jason Secord of Acton applauds the decision.

"A few years ago, I almost lost the vision in my right eye because of a condition called iritis. I went to my optometrist and he knew what was wrong but he couldn't prescribe the drops that I needed," said Secord. "Now if I ever have a problem again, I can go to my optometrist right away without putting my eye health at risk by waiting to see three different doctors for treatment."

Optometrists now have the power to prescribe eye drops and antibiotic pills on the designated list of medications.

The list of eye diseases and conditions include bacterial and viral infections, red eye from wearing contact lenses, eyelid infections and swelling, eye pain, allergies, superficial foreign bodies in the eye and glaucoma.

Giddens said optometrists can now prescribe antibiotics, anti viral medications, topical steroid drops, antihistamines and anti-allergy drops.

He said in the past it's not been uncommon for a patient with a red eye to come in to his office Friday, he diagnoses the problem, but can't prescribe anything. And with no ophthalmologist appointments available until after the weekend, the patient is sent to sit in the ER department at Etobicoke or Credit Valley Hospital to see an ophthalmologist on call.

"It's improvement in access and a win for the taxpayer," said Giddens.

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