



ECOO Guidance

Good online practices for professionals

April 2018

Introduction

As in many other sectors, the online presence of optical and optometric services and products is growing. A functioning digital single market is a high priority for the European Union, as it is believed it will contribute EUR 415 billion per year to the European economy and to create jobs. This creates opportunities for new start-ups as well as for existing companies to access a market of over 500 million people.

Over recent years, the optical and optometric industry has seen a significant increase in e-commerce. It can extend the reach of traditional practices and professionals and open up new business opportunities. But this depends on fair competition and consumers and patients being able to make informed choices. The sale of spectacles and contact lenses via online distribution channels is often driven by competitive pricing and discounts. This has brought uncertainties to some offline businesses and has raised important safety questions for consumers and patients when it comes to products such as medical devices.

The reason spectacles, contact lenses and low vision aids are categorised as medical devices is because of their direct link to people's vision and/or eye health. These medical devices require special measurements, proper fitting and they are personalised according to the needs of each patient. Eye care professionals are trained to ensure that their patients or consumers receive services of an appropriate standard. Online services cannot offer the same direct personal contact but can overcome some of the challenge of offering remote services through use of technology.

Recognising the increasing take-up of online services and evolving solutions being offered, this document offers guidance to professionals who are (or are planning on) offering online services or engaging in e-commerce so as to promote good online practice which is in the best interest of consumers and patients.

Disclaimer

This document is a non-binding guidance document drawn-up by ECOO for eye care professionals offering online services or engaging in e-commerce. It aims to raise awareness about the importance of responsible online services. The guidance is not exhaustive but focusses on the topics which ECOO has identified as the essential professional principles for online practice. The underlying professional approach to online practice must be the same as for off-line practice; that is honesty, safety, informed consumer and patient choices, transparency and integrity. ECOO actively promotes these professional and business principles but is not liable for the behaviour or practices of any particular professional,

business or consumer/patient. The terms “consumer” and “patient” are used to reflect the fact that optical and optometric services can be classified under the healthcare or handicraft sectors in different countries.

Key principles for professionals to consider when offering online optical & optometric services and/or engaging in e-commerce:

Definition of services and transparency

- Professionals should be clear on their online site about the services they provide and any limitations these may have. They should not promote their services in ways that can be misinterpreted by consumers or patients.
- Patients or consumers should be informed about who they are dealing with and how, and have access to the background and professional qualifications of the person(s) behind the website or app.

Awareness of the regulatory framework

- When engaging in online services or e-commerce, professionals should inform themselves about the regulations that apply to online healthcare/handicraft services in their respective countries and (where relevant) in the countries in which the patients or consumers using the services are located.
- Professionals should be aware of what is permitted and what is prohibited. This includes, for instance, who is legally allowed to provide optical and optometric services in the country in question and with what scope of practice.
- Professionals should ensure that optical devices such as spectacles and contact lenses that are provided online match the specifications provided by the patient or consumer. If a different device is substituted for the advice specified by the patient or consumer, the professional making the substitution should take responsibility for this.
- Information about the competent authority governing healthcare/handicraft services in that country should be identified and information should be made readily available to consumers or patients, including about any complaints procedures they may have.
- In case of cross-border dealings, the professional needs to be aware of and provide information on the applicable law when it comes to service delivery, return policies and payment terms.

Privacy and data access

- The General Data Protection Regulation comes into force in May 2018. Professionals should make sure they are familiar with the provisions governing data protection of their consumers or patients.
- The privacy of consumers or patients must be protected at all times. The consumer or patient should be informed about use and storage of their personal data and that it will not be shared without permission. In some countries the healthcare data is stored by law in a central database, in which case the social security number of the patient/customer may be needed to deliver the service.
- A secure system needs to be in place for any online payments.

Communications with patients

- Communications with patients and consumers should be handled in a professional and transparent manner.

- Available communication channels (e.g. live chats, phone number, e-mail etc.) including the response delay should be clearly presented to the patient or consumer.
- It is important that these channels are secure in particular when patient data is being transferred.

Integrity of services provided

- The well-being of the consumer/patient should always be the priority. Given that online services have limits in terms of measurements being taken directly, the fitting of spectacles, contact lenses and the ability to carry out a full eye examination, professionals should refer patients to an appropriate eye care practitioner for an in-person visit as and when needed (e.g. when findings and results are ambiguous or outside the scope of an online service as defined and offered to the patient).
- Patients should be given the appropriate aftercare advice for the products they purchase online, and be reminded of the need for regular visits to their optician to ensure long-term eye health. The precautionary principle should take precedence over any commercial interest.

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