

Webex Testimony by Dr. Zach Unruh, OD MD

HB 2223 – in Opposition

House Committee on Health and Human Services

March 12, 2025

Chair and members of the committee, my name is Dr. Zach Unruh, I graduated optometry school from University of Houston College of Optometry in 2010 and practiced optometry for 7 years in rural Kansas before beginning medical school at The University of Kansas School of Medicine. I graduated in 2021 and began a 4-year residency training to become an ophthalmologist in Texas at Baylor Scott and White health system. I will be starting a 2-year fellowship in vitreo-retinal surgery in Columbus Ohio this summer.

The goal of my testimony is to provide a brief review of my experience training in both optometry and ophthalmology.

In optometry school, the bulk of direct patient care came during the final year of training in community clinics as a mix of routine eye care, treating chronic conditions, and learning to recognize ocular emergencies and refer as appropriate. I estimate I graduated with at least 1500 patient encounters, mostly routine care. I felt comfortable with the pace of a full clinic and with my decision making about 2 years into private practice.

Residency is 1 year of general medicine, followed by 3 years of ophthalmology. About 60 hours/week seeing patients in clinic or in the OR, studying for weekly conference, preparing for grand rounds and journal club, practicing in the skills lab, and taking call 2-3 nights per week.

For a total of 4 months, my responsibilities involved seeing urgent referrals and hospital consults for vision threatening and sometimes life-threatening pathology. I have logged over 5500 primary patient encounters and almost 900 procedures to date. All of these procedures require supervision from pre op counseling to post operative care.

My primary goal as a physician has always been to optimize patient outcomes, and optometrists already have a clearly defined and irreplaceable role in doing so. My optometric training prepared me well to provide care within the current scope, but I would not have been comfortable with anything beyond that. As I accumulated experience practicing optometry, I sensed a gap in my knowledge and skills that ultimately motivated me to pursue an additional 10 years of training.

Through all of this, the largest difference I've noticed lies in the mindset and approach to healthcare as a proceduralist versus a primary care provider. In the ability to not only handle unexpected problems during a procedure, but to anticipate and avoid possible complications. The most difficult part of procedures is not the mechanics, but the preoperative planning, counseling, and decision making.

I value the optometric community and the time I spent practicing. Eye care would not be possible without their vast contributions. Fortunately, many of my missteps as an optometrist were reversible with no long-term consequences. The hardest lesson of residency has been that once you begin manipulating human tissue, there is no going back, and the patient must live with the consequences of your actions.

I expected my training experiences to be different, but I have been overwhelmed by just how dramatic the differences truly are. Thank you for your time and consideration.