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California Senate Approves SB 622 to Help CA's Doctor Shortage

Measure will enable doctors of optometry to provide expanded services including some immunizations and minor procedures

SACRAMENTO, CA – The California Senate voted 34-4 on Friday to approve Senate Bill 622, a bill by Sen. Ed Hernandez, D-Los Angeles, that will allow doctors of optometry to gain special certifications to perform more medical services for patients including some immunizations and minor procedures.

SB 622 will increase access to health care by enabling doctors of optometry to practice to the full extent of their education , as well as choosing to undergo additional training for certain important health services.

“The Affordable Healthcare Act has placed three million additional Californians into our health care system,” Hernandez said. “This bill will allow doctors of optometry to examine, diagnose, prevent and treat conditions to the full extent of their training.”

Hernandez said the bill was negotiated and crafted with many parties within the health system and is designed with patient safety as a top priority. “SB 622 will require more than 50 hours of post-doctoral education and training on human patients. Doctors of optometry already are highly trained medical professionals and with this legislation, they can offer even more to our overburdened health care system.”

Gov. Jerry Brown signed a law in 2013 to broaden the scope of public health care that pharmacists can provide to patients, including offering immunizations.

“Optometrists are very highly trained professionals. They are highly educated and underutilized based on the hours of study they undergo,” said Sen. Jeff Stone, a pharmacist, who voted in favor of the measure. “We as pharmacists welcome optometrists helping us fulfill the mission of insuring that we reach a 95 percent immunization rate.”

SB 622 would allow doctors of optometry to undergo extensive hands-on training and education to obtain special certifications to provide certain new services. Only those who seek and complete this additional training will be able to perform the following:

- Laser procedures to treat glaucoma and to remove cloudiness on the front part of the eye that commonly develops after cataract surgery.
- Minor procedures including the removal of tiny lesions on the surface of the eyelid.
- Provide vaccinations for influenza, herpes zoster and pneumonia, consistent with national guidelines for adults over age 18.

Doctors of optometry provide comprehensive eye health care to patients every day, diagnose and treat serious health problems such as glaucoma, infections and inflammations. Optometrists identify signs of certain serious diseases, including diabetes and cancer, and are highly involved in preventive care of their patients for many health conditions.

Californians already lack access to basic medical care made worse by evidence of a dangerous shortage of health care providers that has emerged. Millions of patients who are newly eligible for health insurance under the Affordable Care Act are beginning to enter our already overburdened system. Many are being enrolled in the state Medi-Cal program at a time when fewer and fewer doctors are willing to see these patients.

Only 16 out of 58 counties in California have sufficient numbers of primary care doctors. California has optometrists in more than 1,000 cities and towns and in all but one county – within driving distance of most Californians and in rural and disadvantaged urban neighborhoods that lack other important medical services.

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