



## Guest Editorial

### Why Politics matters to Optometry

By Anne Berk, OD

Optometry is primarily about patient care. In order to take care of our patients, optometrists run businesses, manage staff, and do our best to keep up with changes in instrumentation and technology. Politics is time-consuming, expensive, often discouraging and seemingly has nothing to do with optometry, so why should every doctor be aware and involved? The answer is simple. Without politics, our profession would not exist. In 1905, Oregon optometry was brought into existence by legislation. Everything we can do, must do, or are not allowed to do in terms of patient care is dictated by law or regulation. Times can change quickly, but legislative changes are slow and painful, so optometry can be easily left behind if we are not vigilant and pro-active.

As OOPAC chair and Legislative chair in the late 1980's and early 1990's, I worked to add therapeutic pharmaceuticals to our formulary, and to admit the term "optometric physician" into our law. Since that time we have not seen significant legislation concerning optometry, but it would be a mistake to be complacent. The world has greatly changed in the past 2 decades, and our law has not been keeping up.

Politicians are not bad people. Actually, every politician I've met has been a very nice person, sincere and committed to public service. Being a politician is a terrible job, with long hours and immense stress. Politics is simply a "tit for tat" game, where you must offer someone something **they** want in order to get something **you** want.

There are a few universal truths about politics.

1. It is difficult to stop a proposed law if someone with power really wants to pass it. But, it is practically impossible to pass a law, even with power. This is why it seems that nothing gets done, despite immense effort and expense. When a relatively small profession like Optometry IS successful in passing legislation over highly potent national objection, like our recent *Prohibiting Vision Plan Abuses* legislation (HB3530), it is cause for celebration and renewed determination to continue fighting
2. Politicians will do whatever they need to do to further their Agenda. Agendas are almost always noble: Getting more money for schools, protecting a segment of society or a deeply held belief, changing the tax structure. Maybe their Agenda is what they say it is or maybe not, because they may need to be sneaky and deceptive to further their true Agenda. Whatever it is, it isn't Optometry (unless you lived in Oregon 1964-1980, when Jason Boe, a PUCO grad and optometrist, was in the Oregon Legislature and passed the DPA law).
3. Money buys access. If you support a politician financially, they will meet with you. That is all money will get you, though. Whether they will work for what you want depends on how it affects their Agenda.
4. Politics is a sneaky, deceptive business. Politicians want to keep everyone happy, in case they need them someday to further their Agenda. Although I haven't ever had a politician lie to my face, there has been constant mis-direction and manipulation. You can't trust ANYONE, and

must always be on your guard. And, have a Plan B and a sense of humor when Plan A falls apart because you were double-crossed.

5. Politics is politics, it is not personal. You can have friends, good friends, who are politicians. That does not mean you can trust them when it comes to politics. What is important to them politically is their Agenda, not yours. If you can't accept that, you will be hurt and your Agenda will suffer.
6. Politics isn't fair, and the "right" thing is whatever is going to further a politician's Agenda. Yes, it always comes down to that.

In order to succeed in the political arena, as a non-politician, it is important to have the proper arsenal for furthering our Agenda: the Survival and Effectiveness of Optometry.

1. Lobbyist – This is the person who knows the players, knows the system, and can navigate the game. Lobbyists are in a category of their own – not politician and not constituent. They take a lot of heat for both sides. No one likes them or trusts them, but the system would be less effective and more painful without them. (Scary thought, huh?)
2. Advocacy committee: These are the people who represent the optometry community. They also are constituents of legislators, just like you are, which carries weight with politicians. They need to be able to commit time and energy to visit with politicians and keep up with everything going on in the capitol, as you never know when an opportunity will come along. For example: to have something that is good for Optometry also be good for a politician's Agenda.

**Call to action:** Know who is on the Advocacy committee. Volunteer to be on the committee if you have the time and interest. If not, ask if there is anything that you can do to be helpful: make phone calls, fill in at their office when they need to be in Salem, offer moral support. There is real expense when doctors have to take whole days away from seeing patients to advocate on your behalf. Let them know that their work is appreciated. They are all volunteers, and this is not easy for the doctors, their offices, and their families.

1. OOPAC: Money won't buy politicians, but it does buy access, remember? It makes our profession a player in the game, and gives us credibility.

**Call to action:** Contribute to OOPAC on a regular basis. OOPAC needs to be able to project a budget for the upcoming legislative cycle. Go to [www.oregonoptometry.org/support-optometry](http://www.oregonoptometry.org/support-optometry) and make a regular monthly contribution. Ask OOPAC to contact you if they are going to support a candidate in your area. Offer to meet with candidates and their staff, educate them on optometry, and present a contribution to the candidate on OOPAC's behalf. Give whatever you think it is worth to not be on the committee!



2. OOPA: Members of the association matter. Optometry is in every community and we provide the lion's share of eye health services to the people of Oregon. Each and every OD is a legislator's constituent, and together we have power.

**Call to action:** Every one of us needs to be acquainted with our State and National representatives, and keep track of what they are doing. Note whether their Agenda seems to have a connection to optometry or health care.

3. Communicate with legislators: Every politician pays attention to communications from constituents. They may not read letters or take phone calls, but someone in their office does. Each communication is logged and tabulated. If an issue comes up, someone searches for the topic to see if communications were for or against the issue. Politicians don't get a lot of letters and phone calls, these days, and they matter.

Whatever you like or don't like about Optometry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (pick a topic: VSP, insurance companies, ICD-10, On-line optical and contact lens companies, EHR) it is regulated by law that may have been written decades ago, when the entities you have opinions about did not exist, or were in a vastly different form than they are today. Every one of the outside entities that affect your ability to practice has aggressive and deep-pocketed lobbying and legislative affairs initiatives. Their priority is the bottom line for their business, NOT patient care or the survival of optometry. Every optometrist has a vested interest in what happens in our state and national politics, and should lay groundwork to become active. "By the time you see the teeth, it's too late."