

WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A SUCCESSFUL MEDICAL EYE CARE PRACTICE



You can start by looking for medical diagnoses in your existing patient base.

BY MARK SCHAEFFER, OD

When we say the words *medical eye care practice*, the image that forms is usually that of a referral center or specialty clinic, but this does not fully encapsulate what a true medical practice looks like.

Every day, patients around the country receive exceptional medical care in a primary eye care or refractive eye care setting. The footprints may look different, but the blueprints look similar. All medical eye care practices start with a caring doctor and staff, a desire to provide more services to their patient base, and a capacity to grow. Each practice has its own culture, but in this article I suggest some steps any practice can take to achieve success in a medical eye care model.

AT A GLANCE

- Optometry has a tremendous opportunity and capability to deliver medical care to a broad array of patients.
- In the future, ophthalmology practices will not be able to manage the growing numbers of patients needing medical eye care.
- Building and maintaining a successful medical practice does not require starting from scratch or a complex redesign; it merely requires taking the existing education and expertise of the doctors in the practice and applying them to the patients already on the books.



THE IMPORTANCE OF STAFF

The clinical staff serve an optometric office in a variety of ways, and their need for growth and knowledge in medical eye care is paramount. Patients draw a first impression of your office from your staff, and these members of your team serve as patient advocates along each patient's experience with your practice. Additionally, your staff members are often a patient's last chance to address any and all issues. A staff that can answer questions about conditions, procedures, and treatments alleviates patient concerns, reduces doctor time, and minimizes practice inefficiency. Use your knowledge to enhance theirs, and the investment will pay back exponentially.

MORE PATIENTS, MORE CARE

More patients need medical eye care each year. The number of ophthalmologists is not growing, but access to optometry continues to rise. In the future, ophthalmology practices will not be able to manage the growing numbers of patients needing medical eye care without help from optometry.

State by state, optometrists are winning the right to expand their scopes of practice to serve the people we see in our offices every day. The doctors in a successful medical eye care practice take note of these new expanded capabilities and work continually to improve their skill sets.

Optometry has the ability to embrace technologies that can be of huge benefit to large populations. With the diversity of our patients' demographics, the variety of their concomitant systemic health conditions, and the range of their socioeconomic status, we have a tremendous opportunity to deliver exceptional medical care to an exceptionally broad array of patients.

When most patients visit the eye doctor, they are probably not thinking about how their vision plays a role in their overall health. It is our job as optometrists to seek out the factors that may affect our patients' sight and manage those factors to the best of our abilities.

WHAT IS A MEDICAL EYE CARE PRACTICE?

A medical practice includes all the things that place optometry at the forefront of health care. Medical eye care requires active involvement in managing acute and chronic conditions that affect the eye and body, monitoring of systemic conditions and their ocular manifestations, and use of diagnostic and therapeutic tools that can affect the patient's whole system. Beyond this, the medical optometrist must engage in accurate and timely communication with other medical specialties within and outside of eye care. Patients must understand that their health is best served by the medical eye care practice.

If a practice doesn't consider itself

to be a medical eye care practice but wants to transition into a more medically oriented model, the practice leaders can start by simply taking stock of what they currently do on a daily basis. They are already detecting and managing pathology for patients who come in with self-diagnoses. They should recognize that there is an opportunity to do the same for other patients who present with symptoms or signs on wellness exams. For advanced practices, there is always room for improvement to make systems more efficient or to bring in new ways to evolve care.

Do not forget, although the success of the medical practice is doctor-driven, it is staff-implemented. The role of the optometric staff in the successful medical practice cannot be understated (see *The Importance of Staff*).

WAYS TO THRIVE

Here are some steps that medical eye care practices can take to thrive.



Put the Patient First

Medical eye care is not undertaken simply to avoid vision care plans or

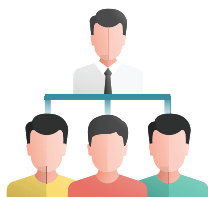
increase reimbursement. The central focus must be the patient and his or her condition. Without making the patient the priority, the practice will not succeed in its endeavor to treat and manage ocular disease.



Hunger for Knowledge and Expertise

Continuing education hours are mandated for

licensure, but the topics selected are not. Successful practices are constantly exploring new ways to manage and treat diseases. They are also looking for concrete and practical steps that they can use in clinic immediately.



Delegate Authority

Give staff members the knowledge and authority to recognize patterns

and act accordingly to educate and manage patients. This will allow the doctor to focus more on the patient at hand. The source of the information given to patients matters less than the content of that information.



Conduct Consistent Training

Staff lunch-and-learns, presentations, and

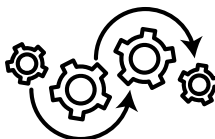
case reports are ways to continue teaching members of the team about disease states, therapies, and considerations for patients. A well-trained staff will advocate for the best care for the patient.



Be Open to Experimentation

Practices that use new technologies and therapies are learning the best ways to

implement care. This requires flexibility to see what works and adapt it to fit the practice model. It also includes willingness to think outside the box to deliver care to patients.



Institute Systems of Efficiency

The medical practice is

always looking for ways to create efficiencies to make processes run more smoothly and easily for patients and staff members.



Maintain Open Relationships With Industry

Practices must seek out, create, and

nurture relationships with industry in order to deliver the best possible care. We can use the expertise of industry to grow the knowledge base of our doctors and staff members. In turn, the practice's expertise can help to grow the market for products and services among the patient population.



Stay Up to Date on Medications

This applies not just to eye care but also

to common systemic diseases. Patients today, especially those who are elderly, may have long lists of medications, and we must be aware of possible interactions and complications.



Take an Active Role in Comanagement

Again, this applies not only to ocular but also to systemic conditions. The

referral process should be two-way and not transactional, whereby the patient returns only for an annual eye exam. Communication doesn't need to be complex, but it should be accurate and appropriate.



Have an Extensive Network of General Practitioners and Specialists

Many conditions treated in the opto-

metric office have systemic involvement. The thriving medical eye care practice should have an influx of patients from general practitioners and specialists who know that the local optometrist understands how the eye interacts with their patient's specific conditions.



Get Involved With the Community

Sponsoring a local medical-based nonprofit organization provides an

opportunity for the practice to advertise its expertise in treating a specific condition and its ocular manifestations.

NO NEED TO REINVENT THE WHEEL

Building and maintaining a successful medical practice does not require starting from scratch or having to design a complex structure. It merely requires taking the education and expertise the doctors and the practice already have and applying them to the thousands of patients already on the books. Small steps in creating a culture of medical eye care can permeate from one-on-one relationships with patients all the way through to the outward-facing personality of the practice. ■

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- Financial disclosure: None