KEEPING EYE CARE WHERE IT BELONGS

Helpful steps to steer patients away from ERs and urgent care centers and into OD practices.

BY SULMAN HANS, OD, MS, FAAO, DIPL ABO

If you have ever heard a patient say they went to the ER but were told to follow up with an eye doctor, you are not alone. ERs and urgent care centers routinely receive eye complaints that could easily—and more appropriately—be handled in an optometrist's chair. On average, more than 25% of patients referred to eye care providers from an ER have nonurgent conditions.[1,2] Additionally, although a large portion of emergency physicians have access to basic ophthalmic equipment, most are often not comfortable using that equipment, performing an eye examination, or making vision- or life-saving diagnoses.[3] This trend not only contributes to unnecessary health care spending but also causes delays in necessary care, putting patients at risk.

Following are some strategic steps optometrists can take to steer patients away from ERs and toward optometry practices when they experience an ocular emergency.

STEP NO. 1: EDUCATE PATIENTS ON WHEN TO SEE AN OD FIRST

Most people do not understand the full scope of optometry. As a result, even nonurgent symptoms such as conjunctivitis and dry eye flareups send people to the ER.

It is our job to educate patients before they face a crisis. Simple strategies include the following:

In-office education. Use brochures and signage to inform patients about common eye emergencies and why optometrists are best suited to handle them.

Digital outreach. Share informative content on your practice's website, email newsletters, and social media that outlines signs of ocular emergencies and the advantages of seeing an OD first.

Video content. Short, engaging videos can explain the difference between eye conditions requiring urgent attention versus those needing ER care.

Consider a "When to Call Us First" campaign that empowers patients to recognize symptoms such as suddenly blurred vision, flashes and floaters, corneal abrasions, and red eyes as those that optometrists treat every day, often faster and more affordably than an ER. Office staff can also be trained to reinforce these messages during patient interactions.

Ultimately, if patients understand we are available and equipped for urgent care, they will be more likely to call our offices before heading to urgent care or the ER.

STEP NO. 2: INCREASE YOUR AVAILABILITY

One of the most cited reasons patients go to urgent care or the ER is convenience and after-hours accessibility.[4,5] Many patients assume they cannot be seen quickly or effectively by an eye doctor for their condition. We can change this perception by offering same-day or walk-in appointments, extending our office hours, and/or implementing on-call triage systems.

Offer Same-Day or Walk-In Appointments

Reserving blocks of time for urgent and emergent visits lets patients know your office is prepared to handle immediate eye concerns.

Extend Office Hours Strategically

Opening early and closing later a few days a week or offering limited weekend hours can reduce the incentive to visit urgent care.

Implement an On-Call Triage System

You do not have to be on call 24/7, but implementing a system that allows established patients to speak with an OD (or trained staff) after hours for guidance, having a clear system for triage, and scheduling urgent visits makes your practice the obvious choice for care.

Promote these offerings on your practice website and Google listing so they appear when someone searches "eye emergency near me."

STEP NO. 3: BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH LOCAL CARE PROVIDERS

Take the time to build relationships with local providers so they know where to turn in an ocular emergency. This can be done via outreach and education, referral partnerships, and clinical integration.

Outreach and Education

Introduce yourself to local primary care providers, urgent care centers, and ER directors. Provide them with referral materials, brochures, and a list of the ocular emergencies you manage.

Referral Partnerships

Establish an agreement where ERs and urgent care centers can directly refer non–sight-threatening ocular complaints to your practice.

Clinical Integration

If you're part of a larger health care system, work to be included in triage protocols and care pathways for ocular complaints. Position yourself as a partner and emphasize that these relationships can enhance patient outcomes, reduce health care costs, and ease overcrowding in ERs.

STEP NO. 4: USE TELEHEALTH FOR AFTER-HOURS CARE

Not every patient needs an immediate in-person examination. For example, a quick look at a red, irritated eye on video might reveal a benign cause—or signal something that requires urgent attention. Telehealth can be a valuable tool for screening symptoms after hours or on weekends, helping patients decide if they can wait to be seen until the morning, and saving a trip to the ER for issues that do not require emergency intervention. Even a basic telehealth setup can give patients peace of mind—and remind them that you should be their first call for eye concerns.

STEP NO. 5: MARKET OPTOMETRISTS AS URGENT EYE CARE PROVIDERS

Historically, marketing for eye care services has focused on vision correction and routine eye examinations. However, emphasizing our ability to handle urgent and emergency care is vital for changing public perception.

Your practice marketing should include keywords such as *eye emergency*, *urgent eye care*, and *eye injury treatment* in your website's search engine optimization; Google ads or local Facebook ads targeting searchers in your area with symptoms of red eye, eye pain, or vision loss; and community outreach events that educate the public about eye emergencies and when to call an optometrist first.

When patients associate optometrists with urgent care, they are more likely to choose our offices over the ER for non-life–threatening issues.

AT A GLANCE

- ERs and urgent care centers routinely see patients with eye complaints that would be more appropriately handled in an optometrist's chair.
- With some deliberate changes in how we educate the public, collaborate with other health care providers, and increase access to our practices, we can shift the landscape of emergency eye care.
- If patients understand we are available and equipped for urgent care, they will be more likely to call our offices before heading to urgent care or the ER.

STEP NO. 6: TRACK AND SHARE OUTCOMES

Patients who are treated successfully in your office instead of the ER can provide stories that serve as powerful testimonials. With consent, share anonymous patient success stories in your marketing materials, on social media, and in newsletters to referring providers.

It is also helpful to keep track of clinical outcomes, such as the number of urgent visits handled per month, types of conditions treated in-house, and estimated cost savings compared with ER treatment. These data can be presented to local insurers, health systems, and community health boards to position your practice as an essential part of the emergency care ecosystem.

STEP NO. 7: WORK WITH INSURERS AND EMPLOYERS

Payers and large employers have a vested interest in reducing unnecessary ER trips. Build partnerships that highlight your role in reducing health care costs and improving access. Consider offering direct-to-employer eye care programs that include urgent care services, partnering with insurers to be featured in urgent care referral networks or directories, or negotiating bundled or reduced cash-pay fees for acute visits for patients with high-deductible plans.

SHIFT THE FOCUS

Optometrists are highly trained to manage many conditions, but the reality is that patients often do not know where to turn in the moment. With some deliberate changes in how we educate the public, collaborate with other care providers, and increase access to our practices, we can shift the landscape of emergency eye care. ■

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