



CLINICAL CARE DELIVERY: TIPS FOR THE YOUNG OPTOMETRIST



Stay curious, stay flexible, and form strong relationships.

BY RAWZI BAIK, OD

Since completing my optometric training and entering practice, I have learned the importance of building best business practices and establishing relationships in order to deliver clinical care in today's ever-changing world. Throughout optometry school, our focus is on learning about the eye and body in didactic and clinical courses. It is not

until after we graduate that the focus shifts to developing the interpersonal skills we need to serve as clinicians. These soft skills are typically learned and developed over time on the job.

It is critical to learn how to read patients' cues and body language in order to build rapport with them. Without such trust, how will patients feel comfortable enough to confide in

us fully for their eye care? The patient's ownership of and engagement in his or her treatment plan is key to achieving a successful outcome. Over the past 4.5 years, I have learned how to hone these soft skills by maintaining my curiosity and flexibility, and by forming relationships with patients, staff members, mentors, and colleagues.



CURIOSITY

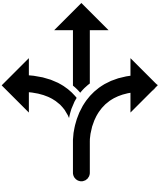
Curiosity was instilled in me from a young age, and it continues to stimulate my interest in learning new techniques and treatments. This love of novelty has also made me realize how important it is to feel comfortable in communicating new ideas to patients. I had to become comfortable with selling, or recommending, novel treatments to patients. I learned to do this by reminding myself why I became a doctor.

One of the cornerstones of health care is providing value to the general public, but first, to do no harm. Selling can be seen as more than just a transfer of goods; it's also a transfer of ideas and knowledge. In recommending a new treatment, we are helping to educate patients on their health so that they can make guided informed decisions. For example, when dealing with an emerging presbyope, we cannot

assume that a pair of progressive spectacles is all they need. Maybe they live an active lifestyle. We should ask about their interest in contact lens wear and discuss the pros and cons of refractive surgery.

We must also discuss all options with staff members and educate them on new products and procedures so that, if patients have questions, the staff can elaborate and pick up the conversation to close the loop.

As time goes by and we see the effects of these conversations through follow-up visits, we can learn to fine tune our approach and make pitches tailored to achieve the best desired outcome. As you might expect, this requires humility and tact. Patients can and will educate us as well. Health care is not a one-sided transaction. We must ask patients about their experiences, and we must also be open to learning if the wrong recommendation was made.



FLEXIBILITY

In practice, I have learned that much fluidity and flexibility is needed within our field. At one optom-

etry school social event, my eyes were opened to the different modes of optometric practice. The event was set up like speed dating; we moved from table to table to speak with practicing optometrists, who openly shared their experiences in settings such as a Veterans Affairs hospital, a private practice, a corporate position, and an ophthalmology center. Their stories showcased the variety of ocular pathology and how each mode of practice is involved in eye care.

Since completing my training, I have been able to experience the need for flexibility firsthand. I started by working at a LASIK institute, later transitioned to a large ophthalmology practice, and am now settling into a corporate role. Each experience has shown me the continuity of care at different stages for the patient.

Flexibility is also important to making sure that health care providers are not stretched too thin. Since the pandemic, with raised levels of collective anxiety in our society, I believe that clinicians must develop healthy ways to blow off steam and take care of their own health.

We must learn to show empathy to patients and also to ourselves. When I notice that I am starting to get impatient, I know that have to take some time for personal care. For example, when a patient asks me to go slower during a refraction, if my first impulse is to think that I cannot stop and disrupt the flow of the schedule, then I know I must talk myself off the proverbial ledge. I remind myself why I became a doctor in the first place and how important the care of each patient is. This process helps me to slow down and give the necessary time to each encounter.



RELATIONSHIPS

Part of self-awareness comes from being able to openly discuss our thoughts and emotions in a safe environment. Relationships and social interactions are healing. In a professional setting, it is important to build connections with colleagues and create the right teams.

A patient once asked me if I personally knew the provider I was referring them to. I did not, and the question caught me off-guard. I now make it a priority to know the providers I

refer to so that I can ensure that my patients are in good hands.

It is also paramount to find mentors and learn from them. When choosing a mentor, be selective about your objectives and where you need help. Mentors offer you their knowledge and experience, and in return you should display genuine gratitude.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Understanding that the eye is connected to the body and that each patient is more than a pair of eyes can help to set one's perspective. We must communicate with other providers involved in our patients' care, including primary care physicians, endocrinologists, rheumatologists, and ophthalmologists. There is much to learn and teach each other about how the eyes and systemic conditions affect one another.

After a couple of years of practicing optometry, I know there is still much more to learn. This invigorates me to continue on my chosen path and gives me strength to carry on. I plan to stay curious, remain flexible, and continue forming strong relationships. I wish the same for my colleagues. ■

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