

## Time to Stop Giving Ourselves Away

BY ARTHUR B. EPSTEIN, OD



Over more than 30 years of contact lens practice, I've heard a lot of talk about high dropout rates and patient noncompliance, but I've seen little done by our profession to change these behaviors. I believe that some of this can be attributed to classic "it is not my problem" thinking. Many of us have convinced ourselves that our patients are compliant and that we lose few. This is understandable—we all want to see ourselves as respected and believe that our advice is heeded. We want to think that our patients value our clinical skills and knowledge. We want to help people, but we also want to be loved.

Sadly, the truth is a bitter pill to swallow. Even the most fastidious contact lens patients are usually non-compliant. A recent study found that 85% of patients believed they were compliant with proper lens wear and care behavior. Shockingly, only 2% actually were compliant, and less than 0.5% of wearers were fully so.<sup>1</sup> That's not just their patients or my patients; this describes your patients, too.

### A BIGGER PROBLEM

Studies also suggest that we are losing existing lens wearers nearly as fast as we can fit new ones. A recent paper reported dropout rates of 23% in the United States,<sup>2</sup> and well-known surveys by John Rumpakis, OD, MBA, have confirmed these disturbing trends worldwide.<sup>3</sup> Even more insidious is the impact these issues have on our practices. Noncompliance tears at the very heart of the doctor-patient relationship, damaging clinical authority and respect for the clinician, while the lack of perceived consequences from noncompliance reinforces inappropriate behavior and trivializes the importance of proper care. Dropout not only deprives patients of an excellent way to correct their vision, but losing a once enthusiastic and satisfied patient has broader consequences. Not only is their business lost, but also gone is their loyalty and the referrals of family and friends.

Despite noncompliance and dropout steadily growing worse, as a professional community, what have we done to address either of these problems? Albert Einstein once described insanity as doing the same thing over and over again while expecting a different outcome. That is exactly what we have been doing.

### KEY POINTS

- Patients' noncompliance with contact lens protocols erodes the doctor-patient relationship.
- Patients who are noncompliant may discontinue contact lens wear and may leave the practice if they become dissatisfied with the level of care they receive.
- Giving away samples, perceived as a solution to noncompliance, may in fact be a detriment.

### THE REAL COST OF FREE

Although the problem of contact lens dropout is multifactorial, I believe that we contribute to the problem. One way we do this is by giving away "free" trial lenses and "free" sample solutions every time we see a patient. My grandfather once told me that things that are free are seen as having little if any value. So, over and over again, we train our patients that what we provide has little value. Giving things away for free does not make patients love us, rather it devalues us in their eyes and damages what has already become a very fragile doctor-patient relationship.

### CONCLUSION

During the coming months, Alcon Laboratories, Inc., will be working with the eye care community to provide a substitute for samples for existing patients that will have substantial value to them. Their goal is to partner with us to increase compliance, reduce dropout, and support the importance of professional care. I think it's time that eye care professionals also started to value their own services and think hard about the real cost of "free." ■

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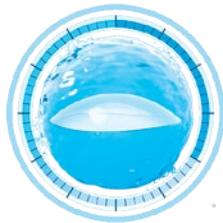
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