

The Patient Experience: It Is What It Is, Until It Isn't

BY JOHN RUMPAKIS, OD, MBA



Being an eye care provider today is complicated. Multiple pressures can distract practitioners from their primary purpose: providing the best possible patient experiences. Yet, we often fall short of this desired outcome not because we do not care, but because we (and our patients) unintentionally become complacent.

OPPORTUNITIES MISSED AND LOST

Optometrists, who outnumber ophthalmologists more than two-to-one,¹ provide the vast majority of annual comprehensive eye examinations and are the forefront of primary eye care for the 314 million people in the United States. The sheer volume of services rendered suggests that optometrists have many opportunities to enhance patients' experiences. Unfortunately, optometry as a profession could be doing a better job at this.

Optometrists should be educating patients on the newest technology, the latest developments, and the benefits they provide. Consumers want to feel special, unique, and valued. When I go to my doctor, I want him or her to be proactive in telling me about new developments in eye care that can benefit me and enhance my quality of life. The contact lens market, one that optometry has essentially cornered, however, illustrates a different trend: About 13.1% of adults in the United States wore contacts in 2001, a figure that rose to just 16.1% in 2012. Given all of the innovations in lenses during that time, the 0.27% annual growth rate seems especially paltry. Many consumers are not aware of the new technology because too often they don't ask—and if they don't ask, we don't tell.

Nearly 4 years ago, I found that the average US practice has a nearly 16% contact lens dropout rate.² Some have reported rates as high as 25%.³⁻⁸ A dropout rate of 16% means that one out of every six patients discontinues wear. This is significant when the mean annual revenue stream of a single contact lens patient is about \$275.² Consider that the average optometric practice has about 3,100 annual patients, 34% of whom wear contact lenses (n = 1,054); 16% of these patients (n = 169) exiting represents about \$46,475 in lost revenue potential in 1 year, and more than \$2 million over the life of the practice.

Another harmful aspect of the "don't ask, don't tell"

KEY POINTS

- Optometrists can enhance patients' experience by discussing advanced-technology options.
- Despite advancements, market penetration of contact lenses has essentially flatlined since 2001.
- Contact lens dropout, as high as 25% in some practices, may affect the practice's bottom line.
- A significant factor in dropout is under-reporting of patients' symptoms by patients themselves.

way of relating to patients is when optometrists assume that if the patient did not mention a problem, then he or she is not having a problem. Data suggest that patients are not always truthful. Whereas about 84% of respondents to a survey noted feeling uncomfortable in their lenses at the end of the day, only 23% ever discussed the issue with their provider.⁹ Similar disconnects were seen with dryness, tired eyes, blurry or hazy vision, being able to feel the lenses in the eye, difficulty with insertion and/or removal, and frustration with the lens care protocol.

CONCLUSION

Taking care of patients is our responsibility; in fact, it is our obligation. If complacency becomes the standard of care, then are we fulfilling our obligation? I would suggest not. We need to maintain a higher standard, making sure that patients benefit from the latest in contact lens technology. We can create the ultimate patient experience—it is what we create, until of course, it isn't. ■

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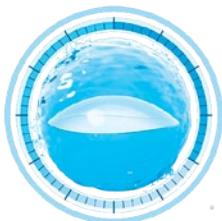
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