

# ALTERNATIVE TREATMENT LEADS TO PERSONAL, PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

Changes in 2017 had a positive effect on this practice.

BY BRITNEY CARUSO, OD, FMNM, ABAAHP



During this past year, I found that dealing with personal hardships made me a stronger person, and this challenge has resulted in the growth of my practice.

Approximately 2 years ago, I developed a potentially blinding retinal vasculitis that was presumably autoimmune in nature.

My retina specialist, Thomas A. Albin, MD, of Bascom Palmer Eye Institute (BPEI), had me taking oral medication to control the inflammation for 6 months. At that time, I requested to try to treat my condition naturally, using only diet and nutraceuticals.

Dr. Albin heard me and truly cared about my concerns. He told me he would allow me to try to reverse my condition using a nontraditional approach for 30 days, but then would insist on putting me back on the medication regimen. When I returned to BPEI after a month of treatment with only diet and nutraceuticals, my retinal condition had subsided. This gave me a feeling of great exhilaration.

## BROADENING EXPERIENCE

Given the impact that diet and nutraceuticals had on my eye condition, I decided that I wanted to share the powerful connection that I found between diet and eye health with

my patients. To this end, I decided to perform fellowships in metabolic and nutritional medicine and in antiaging and regenerative medicine.

I participated in a fellowship program through the American Academy of Anti-Aging Medicine. The fellowship required more than 200 hours of classroom seminars and a certification examination. The exam assessed my understanding of metabolic and nutritional medicine. As a result of my hard work and dedication to this program, I am a Fellow in Metabolic and Nutritional Medicine and a Health Practitioner Diplomate in the Clinical Science of Anti-Aging Medicine. I am one of three optometrists in the nation with these credentials. This certification has attracted patients to my office who want to improve eye health as they inquire about what they need to do to preserve their vision and prevent eye disease. I feel comfortable making nutrition recommendations, and my patients appreciate my input.

## ADVANCING THE PRACTICE

After I performed these fellowships, I continued to grow my practice by incorporating advanced technologies and by thoroughly educating patients about their conditions in and out of the exam chair.

In order to make sound recommendations regarding diet, I believe that it is important to have the ability to detect eye diseases using the most advanced technology, so I recently purchased an iVue optical coherence tomography (OCT) system (Optovue). This equipment has allowed me to detect the earliest signs of macular degeneration and numerous other conditions.

I had a twofold goal when I decided to add this piece of technology to my office. First, I wanted to make sure that I am giving my patients the very best patient care. Second, I wanted to be able use this equipment as a tool to educate patients on their eye exam findings. When you can point to a problem on the screen and compare pathologic findings to normal ones, patients better understand the importance of the care and management plan that we create together.

*(Continued on page 68)*



A number of changes in 2017—from equipment upgrades to hiring—had positive results for one practice.

*(Continued from page 64)*

Patients are truly wowed by this technology, and this has resulted in referrals of friends and family to my practice.

### STAFF ADDITIONS

In another attempt to maintain the highest level of patient care, I recently added an optometric technician to the staff in our office. With her assistance, I have been able to spend more quality time with patients and be more efficient during eye exams. Patients like to know that they are being attended to every step of the way, and having a technician to hold patients' hands from the moment they walk in the door through the completion of the eye exam has been a huge practice builder.

Patients like to stay connected and engaged with our practice, even when they are not in the exam room. To facilitate this, we have also added a social media marketing director to the staff. This person's duties include posting educational information, special promotions, and blogs regarding eye health on various social media platforms.

I have found that it is crucial to hire a designated professional to complete this task, as my time is best spent seeing patients. Social media specialists are educated on how to help your practice grow through its online presence. My main goal with the addition of this position to our office staff was to ensure that my patients can become educated on eye health issues and feel connected to me and my practice.

Unfortunately, it is not easy to determine how much of the growth of our practice is due to our increased online presence. At the end of the day, however, my practice is growing, and I am getting positive feedback, so I continue to believe that social media marketing is an important component in our growing practice.

### LOOKING AHEAD

As I reflect on 2017, I am grateful that I experienced the struggles with my eyes that I described at the outset of this article. As a result of these difficulties, I decided to become better educated in alternative approaches to eye health, and this has elevated the level of patient care in my practice, resulting in expansion of our practice. In fact, we recently opened a second office near Miami.

My associate doctor, Aziah Salla, OD, has done a tremendous job of providing excellent patient care and helping our practice grow with the help of clinical pearls I have shared. My goals for 2018 and beyond are to never become stagnant in my personal and professional growth and to treat all of my patients from my heart. ■

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