

Keys to Patient Selection and the Initial Evaluation for Surgery

No matter what type of surgery is being performed, exceptional customer service should be executed.

BY J. CHRISTOPHER FREEMAN, OD

In today's eye care delivery system, comanagement is a common way patients undergo and receive surgical care. This approach, like single-location surgical care, requires careful patient and procedural selection. Whether a patient is being evaluated for cataract surgery or a potential glaucoma procedure, or if he or she is investigating elective refractive surgery, appropriate matching of the right procedure with the right patient is essential.

COMMUNICATION

Predictably, good communication is the foundation of appropriate patient selection during an initial surgical evaluation. Generally speaking, quality communication between the patient and medical staff is always beneficial, but where vision is concerned—and especially in the case of elective procedures—it is paramount.

The principle factors in such communication are goals and expectations. Before any surgical plan or medical care can begin, the doctor must know what the patient's goals are for the surgery. This information can be gathered in several ways along the path of

the patient's encounter. Whether electronic or hand written, some of this data may come from the patient's intake information, which is gathered during the initial in-person encounter with a medical office staff member or the doctor. Ultimately it is the responsibility of the surgeon to understand the patient's goals before carrying out a surgical plan, but it is the obligation of all care providers involved along the way to help find out those goals and aid the patient in articulating them to the doctor. Patients' goals must be the prime consideration for treatment, of course in addition to appropriately treating concomitant pathology. Prejudices toward certain procedures or devices must be overlooked if they are not truly the most suitable for meeting the patient's goals of surgery.

EDUCATION

After a patient's goals are known, it is then vital that the medical staff appropriately educate him or her as to what the realistic expectations should be. This is part of the informed consent process. Besides discussing or providing information regarding risks, benefits, alternatives, and limitations, patients should be made aware of what they can expect to get out of the procedure they



are about to undergo. A realistic outlook on postoperative results is not only good customer service prior to surgery, but it can also make the entire surgical experience more enjoyable for patients and doctors postoperatively. "An ounce of prevention" seems to be "worth a pound of cure" when it comes to discussing the limitations of any procedure. It is more difficult to discuss complications and atypical or less-than-ideal results with a patient after surgery than before. When risks or limitations are not discussed completely or clearly before surgery, patients will often blame the surgeon, staff, or even him or herself rather than statistics when a complication occurs.

Patients are content and pleased with surgical results when their expectations are met or exceeded. Doctors and patients alike are happy when a procedure is successful, whether it is good BCVA following cataract surgery, excellent UCVA after LASIK, or reduced dependence on medication subsequent to selective laser trabeculoplasty. Many doctors prefer to underpromise and overdeliver when it comes to discussing postoperative expectations at an initial surgical evaluation. This philosophy tends to make meeting the patient's expectations easier and results in an even happier patient with an increased perception of success if his or her expectations are exceeded. This approach should not be taken with the intent of deceiving patients, but with realism and honesty.

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS AND PROVIDING SERVICE

Conveying realistic expectations to patients is not solely the responsibility of the surgeon; it extends to the comanaging doctor and to the staff. The comanaging eye care provider and his or her staff must explain to patients what to expect during the surgical examination and preoperative testing as they assist the patient in scheduling the preoperative workup. Once at the surgeon's office, the staff should work to manage the patient's expectations throughout the entire process. Ideally this communication will continue at the surgery center, clinic, or hospital where the surgery will be performed. Reiterating expectations instills comfort and confidence in the patient ensuring a more enjoyable surgical experience. This repetition in message of what a patient should expect comes back to communication and how important that is for all facets of the surgical experience.

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in many cases, may be an event of great anxiety. The emotional aspect of surgery must be considered as well as the physical one. Both are part of the patient's or the customer's experience, especially if a patient is paying money out of pocket, such as in the case of elective vision correction surgery or for upgrade charges like in the case of a presbyopia-correcting IOL with cataract surgery.

According to Shareef Mahdavi, the president of SM2 Strategic, "In today's medical environment, any time you ask the patient to pay directly for services, their expectations go way up. This requires the entire practice to focus as much on the customer experience as well as the clinical outcome." Additionally, from a practice-building perspective, outstanding customer experiences can increase word-of-mouth patient referrals. This is true not just for patients but also for the referring doctors, as there is no doubt patients will discuss their experience with their primary eye care practitioner. A happy patient who tells his or her optometrist about a pleasant surgical experience could lead to more referrals for the surgeon.

CONCLUSION

It is not surprising that choosing the correct procedure for the right patient is crucial to quality ophthalmic surgery. Understanding a patient's goals and establishing realistic expectations are keys to providing reputable surgical care whether comanaged or not. Such undertakings, as well as remarkable customer experience, require exceptional communication on behalf of the patient and all who take part in his or her surgical care. ■

J. Christopher Freeman is the US director of Clinical Services at nJoy Vision in Oklahoma City, an adjunct assistant professor of optometry at NSU Oklahoma College of Optometry, and vice president of the Optometric Council on Refractive Technology (OCRT). Dr. Freeman may be reached in care of Advanced Ocular Care by e-mailing ckoury@bmcctoday.com.

