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Telephone Triage – Urgency or Emergency?

www.EyeSystems.info Mary E. Schmidt, ABOC, CPO Mary@EyeSystems.info
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Definition of Triage

- The sorting of patient and allocation of care or treatment according to the urgency of their need.



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OPTICAL VS. OCULAR EMERGENCY



- Ask yourself is the problem with their eye or eyeglasses or contact lenses?

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What Must Be Done To Prepare

▪ Establish an Office Policy

- Get your doctor's input.
- Hold a staff meeting to ask questions & discuss procedures.
- Write down the guidelines and procedures.
- Regular review and update your procedures.
 - What is working well?
 - How can you improve?



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Who Handles the Calls?

▪ Receptionist? Technician?

- How will they be trained?
 - How long is the training?
- Your behavior.
- Practice and role-play.



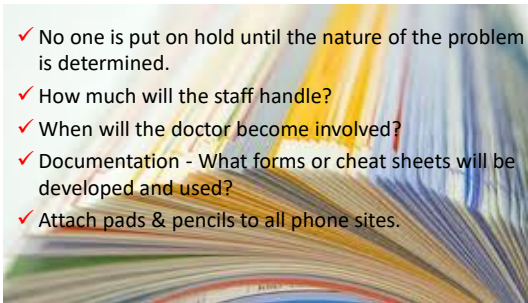
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What Procedures Will be Followed?

- ✓ No one is put on hold until the nature of the problem is determined.
- ✓ How much will the staff handle?
- ✓ When will the doctor become involved?
- ✓ Documentation - What forms or cheat sheets will be developed and used?
- ✓ Attach pads & pencils to all phone sites.



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Emergency vs Urgency

- THE MOST COMMON CALLS:
- CORNEAL ABRASIONS - remove lenses
- SUBCONJUNCTIVAL HEMORRHAGE – schedule appt. with Dr.
- FOREIGN BODIES - do not irrigate, rub or use medications. Don't try to remove.
- CHEMICAL BURNS - Rinse up to an hour.
- CHALAZION/PTERYGIUM/PINGUECULA – Warm compresses



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EMERGENCIES

Conditions requiring patients to be seen immediately, within hours, or on the same day.

1. **Chemicals or other toxins splashed into the eye within the last hour.** The patient should be instructed to irrigate immediately and profusely with clean water if saline is not available. They should not put any drops into their eyes until they have been examined and the chemical and any damage to the eye have been clearly determined.
2. **Sudden loss or decrease of vision, or the appearance of a cloudy veil in front of the eye.** This could be a central retinal artery occlusion, in which case the patient must be seen within an hour of occurrence. It could also be a sign of retinal detachment.
3. **Penetrating ocular injury.** The seriousness must be determined immediately in order to know whether to have the patient come into the office or to send them directly to an emergency service.
4. **Forceful trauma to the eye or adnexa.** This may result in a blowout fracture of the orbit (which may cause other problems in the sinuses), a retinal detachment, or hyphema (blood in the anterior chamber).
5. **Sudden onset of halos around lights, especially if associated with a red, painful eye or brow.** This could be an acute angle closure attack which should be treated immediately.
6. **Sudden onset of persistent, severe pain in or around the eye, or severe pain on movement of the eye.** This could be orbital cellulitis, a severe infection that should be treated quickly to avoid further complications.
7. **Foreign body in the eye, or the suspicion of such.** Removing a foreign body soon after its introduction can prevent further damage to the eye.
8. **Sudden onset of flashing lights and/or floaters.** This could be a vitreous detachment, a retinal detachment, or a symptom of migraine.
9. **Sudden onset of diplopia (double vision, not blur).** This could be the result of a neurological problem or a mass in the brain, and after initial examination, further testing may be ordered.
10. **Sudden onset of drooping eyelid.** Again, this could be the result of a neurological problem.
11. **Sudden onset of persistent red eye, with or without pain, visual disturbance, or crusting.** This could be a sub-conjunctival hemorrhage, an infection, or an inflammation. Treatment depends on the cause and can vary from passive (the hemorrhage will resolve with time) to aggressive use of the appropriate pharmacological agent.



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URGENCIES

Patients who should be seen sooner than usual, as soon as possible without true emergency status.

1. Blurred vision which has developed over time. This may be considered an emergency depending on symptoms, so careful triage is necessary to determine the appropriate course of action.
2. Contact lens wearers with sudden problems of vision, discomfort, or eye appearance. The patient should be told to remove the lenses until he or she can be thoroughly examined and the problem determined.
3. Lost or broken eyewear or contact lenses. This may seem like a critical emergency to some patients, and appropriate concern and attention must be paid to resolve their problem.

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Your Patient's Perception

- Some think it's an emergency - it's not.
- Some think it is not an emergency - it is.



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Language you Use



- Avoid big, technical words.
- Abnormal vs. Unusual
- Disorder vs. Condition

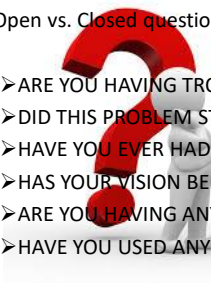
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The Questions You Ask

- Open vs. Closed questions
 - ARE YOU HAVING TROUBLE WITH YOUR EYES?
 - DID THIS PROBLEM START RECENTLY?
 - HAVE YOU EVER HAD THIS PROBLEM BEFORE?
 - HAS YOUR VISION BEEN AFFECTED?
 - ARE YOU HAVING ANY DISCOMFORT?
 - HAVE YOU USED ANY EYE DROPS?



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Your Actions

- WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE ACTIONS?
- Take immediate action at home.
- Go to the hospital.
- Come to the office immediately.
- Come to the office within a day or so.
- Refer the patient to another type of specialist.



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Your Actions

- How quickly do you respond?
 - Minutes
 - Hours
 - Days
 - Weeks



What happens if you're wrong?

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NEVER!

- Never draw conclusions too quickly.
- Never divulge patient confidentiality.
- Never diagnose.
- Never give advice or opinions.
- Never promise anything.
- Never compare your doctor's skills to those of others.



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REMEMBER

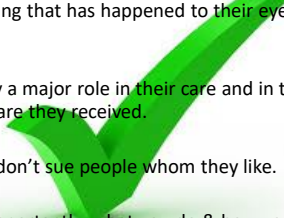
- Comments.
- Appointments.
- Phone calls.
- Copies of communications.
- Don't throw files away.
- DEALING WITH MISTAKES.
- Omissions
- Changes.



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Conclusion

- Patients call when they are frightened or confused about something that has happened to their eyes or to their vision.
- You play a major role in their care and in their perception of the care they received.
- People don't sue people whom they like.
- More importantly, what you do & how you handle the situation may save the patient's sight.



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