



Why Get An Eye Exam?

The 'Wellness' Opportunity Gathers Momentum for Vision Care

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Marge Axelrad: Editorial Director

NEW YORK—The tough economy. President Obama’s mission to reform health care. A concern about workplace productivity. The aging population. The awareness of learning issues among children. The rise of undetected refractive errors in the U.S. and around the world. The changing scope of practice in optometry. The growing awareness of the need for healthy lifestyles. The proven connection between eyecare and general health.

These trends, and dozens more, are why “wellness”—and its clear relationship to eye health—is an issue now firmly on the radar of vision care professionals, organizations, public healthcare officials, government legislators, optical retailers, managed care groups and vision care products companies.

It is part of a groundswell of health care, practitioner, policy and business initiatives that have the potential to transform the vision care field and raise vision care’s profile to decisionmakers and consumers/patients in the U.S.

In this latest in a series of reports on the topic, **Vision Monday** spoke with a range of industry leaders and professionals about “wellness,” a term that used to connote herbal medicines and communing with nature and now is a most serious phrase and issue.

Clearly, from their comments, eye health’s wellness connection is hitting prime time.

Observed Jack Schaeffer, OD, of Birmingham, Ala.-based Schaeffer Eye Centers: “There is much talk today about nationalizing medical insurance, wellness care and of course maximizing the health care dollar. Eyecare plays a major role in preventive health care. Diagnosing systemic diseases as diabetes and hypertension, serious eye diseases that can

cause blindness like glaucoma, and even enhanced school performance are all important reasons why eyecare needs to be a part of any major healthcare initiatives. Educating the public on the importance of this eyecare should be a major part of health awareness campaigns for all relevant institutions.”

Noted Pauline Yan, vice president, Integrated Healthcare Market Solutions, Essilor of America, “We [all] need to extend our scope of influence. Focusing on the optical industry is like preaching to the choir. We need to have more efforts with the general population at large. The current economic downturn will cause consumers to scrimp on unnecessary items. As an industry, we need to help consumers understand having good eyecare and good vision is too important to scrimp on.”

“The economic downturn should make it even more imperative that we focus on eye health and wellness when we communicate to consumers,” stated Dave Cole, general manager of the Americas, Transitions Optical, Inc. Several years ago, Transitions launched the breakthrough “Healthy Sight” initiative, Healthy Sight Institute and propriety studies linking eyecare’s relationship to over-the-counter and Rx medications, surveys on UV awareness, multi-cultural research and other programs.

“As consumers think about where to cut corners, seeing their best should not be one of them. This is an area we should not compromise,” Cole declared. “Through the Transitions Healthy Sight Working for You initiative, for example, we have been providing education to benefits brokers and HR professionals about the value of a vision plan and the role of quality vision care and vision wear in employee productivity and overall health.

“In just a little over a year, we are certainly seeing more visibility for vision. Through our outreach to benefits media we’ve seen many more stories, for example, on the topic of vision benefits—doubling in fact from 2008 to 2009 so far. We’ve found strong allies in the vision plans providers in promoting the wellness message. Especially as our government considers the state of today’s healthcare and reform possibilities, the vision story must be told loud and clear.”

In fact, new studies and estimates on the clear connection between eye exams and disease detection, workplace productivity and healthy lifestyles abound as the new Administration is pushing for reform overhauls. Just this month, a study by researchers from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of School of Public Health, the International Centre for Eyecare Education, the University of New South Wales and the African Vision Research Institute reported that corrected vision impairment could prevent billions of dollars in lost productivity annually. Worldwide, researchers estimate, nearly 158 million people globally suffer with vision impairment resulting from uncorrected refractive error, which can usually be eliminated with a pair of eyeglasses and an eye examination. The study is published in the June 2009 issue of the Bulletin of the World Health Organization.

In the U.S., VSP, the largest managed vision care benefits company, last month released a long-term, third-party study which shows that VSP helps save its clients an estimated \$3 billion on healthcare costs associated with chronic diseases detectable through an eye exam. The same study demonstrated that employers can reap an estimated 94 percent return on investment on dollars spent on a VSP exam benefit.

Gary Brooks, president, VSP Vision Care, stated, “VSP has always focused on eye health and the connection to overall wellness. The VSP Eye Health Management Program focuses on the early treatment and management of both eye and related health conditions through our network of doctors. It complements our clients’ existing disease management and wellness programs by using data to ensure patients receive the care they need.”

He added, “We collect patient data in addition to diagnosis codes when a VSP doctor submits a claim. This data includes HIPAA-compliant information on VSP members who self-report or present signs of one or more of these conditions: diabetes, glaucoma, macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy, hypertension, and corneal arcus. Patient-specific information submitted on claims can be shared with health plans and disease management vendors. We can also share summary disease prevalence data with employers. This helps identify patients who could benefit from disease management or wellness programs. Members identified as diabetic in VSP’s system receive a reminder letter from VSP 14 months after their last exam. This is crucial, especially when you consider that 90 percent of all diabetes-related blindness can be prevented with regular eye exams.”

Brooks added, “As the Capitol Hill healthcare reform discussion heats up, we have state professional representatives reaching out to their local peers and sharing statistics drive conversation on elevating awareness for patients and decision makers.”

This month, Luxottica Group, via its retail businesses, its EyeMed Vision Care managed vision division and outreach via its independent wholesale accounts, said it intends to put a heavy spotlight on the connection between regular eye exams and general health and wellness through new advertising messages to debut this year, plus a \$10 million commitment this year by EyeMed to educate its members about the importance of eye exams.

At Pearle Vision, patients will receive a copy of their own “Health & Wellness” report following their eye exams.

Liz DiGiandomenico, president of EyeMed, said, “From 2005 to 2008, total reported EyeMed exam claims grew 76 percent, and nearly 70 percent of the exams performed were by independent eyecare providers participating on the network.

She continued, “EyeMed ties the vision wellness message to measurable data. As early as 2004, EyeMed began requesting that providers submit all ICD-9 diagnosis codes to assist with employer and health plan management of high-risk health conditions. An update to

our online claims system in 2007 required providers to submit ICD-9 diagnosis codes so EyeMed could better support health plan and employer disease management efforts.”

DiGiandomenico added, “With an industry focus, we can elevate the importance of the eye exam and the role the eyecare professional plays in improving patients’ wellness while ‘growing the pie’ for the optical industry.”

Commented Don Yee, president of OptumHealthVision, part of the giant United Healthcare Group, “As part of UnitedHealth, OptumHealth Vision is committed to the individual’s well-being. We promote the concept of ‘wellness’ and engage the public and all our constituents in getting the word out on the benefits of an eye exam. Our provider panel includes both private practice eye doctors and retailers. To all of them, we offer the same communications and offer communications tools they can use with their patients.

Essilor’s Yan explained, “Essilor’s Integrated Healthcare Market Solutions business unit has been very active in the last two years in developing educational materials for all stake holders from open enrollment events through vision care plans or trade shows such as ADA and AARP, and for the ECPs, we have created some managed care courses to help them understand the different manage vision care plans.”

Further, Yan added, “We have created a suite of broker tools and services that can help them sell vision care products more effectively. For the employers, we have developed a cost model to allow benefit managers to enter their own employee demographics to see how much a suboptimal vision care benefit will cost them in overall healthcare cost.”

Steve Holden, president, Davis Vision, a division of HVHC, whose parent company is Pennsylvania-based Highmark, Inc., one of the country’s largest health insurers, said, “We have had a number of different disease management programs in place with the various health plans we do business with.”

Holden added, “Our ‘Focus on America’ community initiative has been providing vision screenings and eye exams as well as eyeglasses at no cost to the uninsured and underinsured in the communities where we do business.

“There are a number of plans where Davis Vision network optometrists are included as part of the network for medical exams. By achieving and maintaining widely recognized certifications, such as URAC accreditation and NCQA certification, we have helped to elevate the entire vision care industry to the same quality management platform as integrated health care plans.”

Mike Schell, vice president of sales at Costa Mesa, Ca-based MES Vision, noted that the company, “has consistently fostered the educational message about our providers comprehensive vision wellness examination. Monthly e-mail newsletters and printed materials include information about the “MESVision Eye—Health Connection”, updates on the MESVision Web site and several worksite educational efforts throughout the year”

Erich Sternberg, president of AlwaysCare Benefits underscored, “Via our Web site, we offer access to a Vision Health Center that provides educational materials on vision services and their relationship to overall health. We also belong to the National Association of Vision Care Plans (NAVCP) and we speak to our government representative periodically about the importance of vision care.”

In the field, the “medical model” is taking hold throughout optometry. Stated Vince Hayes, vice president of Arizona’s Nationwide Vision, “At the point of service we now obtain patient’s medical information so that we have it on file in the event they have a medical concern that needs to be addressed. And, all of our advertising now also reflects our ability to provide medical services.”

Janie Blackstock, director of marketing and ancillary services, Horizon Eye Care, Charlotte, N.C., told VM, “We have participated in area health screening through employers and other health agencies offering free vision screenings and we have a full time physician relations representative that visits local urgent care, pharmacy clinics, and area primary care practices. Since beginning this program our referrals have increased significantly.

And Horizon partners with local primary care physicians to assist in diabetic screening via a secure connection to the Horizon EyeRoute reading center. One of our ophthalmologists will interpret and forward a report back to the physician.”

Bob Brodney, president, N.C.-based Eye Care Associates, added, “For many years, Eye Care Associates has positioned itself as a more medically based optometric group. We believe that ECPs need to stake out ground of ‘total vision care’ as a component of general health management. More medically-based optometry will be the foundation of strong and sustainable ECP practices.” ■