

Opinion

Training Ophthalmic Personnel: Are You Doing Your Part?

I suppose I should be having an identity crisis. The other day, I concluded a patient visit with a cheery “See you in June.” As I left, the patient said to my tech, “Now that he’s gone, let me tell you about my . . .,” and the door slammed shut. Often I have the feeling that patients would just as soon get rid of me so they can continue conversations with my office staff. But as I think about it, I don’t really care whom the patient chooses to bond with, to listen to, to learn from, as long as they do all of those things. Sometimes it’s me in those roles, but often it’s the wonderful people I hire to help me care for patients. I get a lot of compliments about my staff from patients, as they view their overall experience as positive. I also know those patients will voice their appreciation the next time they see their referring ophthalmologist, over the fence with their neighbors, and with everyone on their cell phone free-call list. Good paraprofessional staff aren’t just useful, they are essential to excellent patient care.

Not only that, the Boomer generation is about to inundate my office. Nationwide, it’s more patients, same number of ophthalmologists. No matter how you analyze it, the simple fact is that all ophthalmologists will need to increase the number of patients they see, and the only way to do that is to have more trained personnel in the office to whom tasks can be delegated.

So where do you find great individuals to fill vacancies or to increase your

office staff? When we hire—and we’re talking Seattle, one of the most desirable places in the country to live—qualified applicants are scarce. Our employment interview of an experienced tech isn’t about helping us decide which of several applicants to hire, it’s about selling the applicant on the practice. Most of the time, there are no experienced applicants, and we end up employing bright, enthusiastic people who will learn on the job.¹

I bet you are thinking that it would be nice if there were an ophthalmic assistant program in your community to train individuals whom you could hire. The Joint Commission on Allied Health Personnel in Ophthalmology accredits training sites, and there are just 27 in the United States, counting assistant-, technician- and technologist-level programs. If you are the average ophthalmologist, there isn’t one near enough to you to be of use to your employment problem. That was our situation in Seattle, until retired chief of ophthalmology at The Mason Clinic Melvin I. Freeman, MD, FACS, had a conversation with Heather Stephen-Selby, RN, ARNP-BC, the dean of allied health at our local Renton Technical College. He learned that community and technical colleges are anxious to fill training needs that lead to job opportunities for students. It was a perfect fit, and Dean Stephen-Selby and Dr. Freeman assembled ophthalmologists and office managers from the leading Seattle prac-

tices for an advisory board, secured state funding, hired ophthalmic technician Larry Bovard, COT, as program director, and started turning out graduates.

You know what? You could do that, too, because it takes just one committed person to start the process.² By the way, board members usually have first crack at hiring the cream of the crop!

¹ To supplement in-house training, the Academy Store www.aao.org/store carries the Allied Health On-the-Job Training Kit.

² Visit www.jcahpo.org/newsite/coaompassistant.html or write Dean Stephen-Selby or Mr. Bovard at 3000 NE 4th St., Renton, WA 98056, or Dr. Freeman at 4625 Yarrow Point Road, Bellevue, WA 98004.



RICHARD P. MILLS, MD, MPH
CHIEF MEDICAL EDITOR, EYENET