

## **Finding a New Normal**

By: Sharhonda Harrill, OD

**“THESE are the times that try men's souls.** The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.” Thomas Pain wrote these words on December 23, 1776 in an article titled “The Crisis.” But it can very well be used in today’s current war on Coronavirus (COVID-19). It is in these times that we must rise to the occasion and show the world that as optometrists we are prepared. But how? We were not taught how to handle a viral pandemic in school. I have been speaking to and observing other healthcare workers, doctors, daycare centers, and various industries across our state in how they are handling this situation and compiled a standard of procedure that will perhaps help us all find a new normal as we prepare to go back into our offices and serve our various communities.

In my office we have come up with various ways to screen patients prior to them entering the office. First and foremost, I have provided everyone with gloves and masks to protect themselves and/or others. We still do not have a good handle on this virus and we may be asymptomatic and not know we have the virus. We have asked, probably like most of you, for all patients with any cold or flu symptoms or anyone with a fever to not come in unless it is an emergency/urgent visit (i.e. Red eye). We decided that any of these patients should be seen at the beginning or end of the day when no one else is in the office. The entire building would be sanitized once they leave. If someone walked into the office with any of these symptoms, we would get everyone out of the office area and quickly move the potentially infected patient into an exam room to be taken care of, disinfect the office, then have everyone return. Some healthcare workers have requested all patients stay in their car until it is time for them to be seen. Then, the receptionist would give them a call to come inside. I think this is another good way to minimize contact and promote social distancing.

For the well patients and routine exams, we still screen them. We have asked all patients to ring a doorbell I placed beside the door before entering and to wait for someone to assist them. Then we allow them to enter and check their temperature with an Infra-Red (non-invasive) thermometer. If their temperature is above 99.9°F we ask them to leave or to wait outside for at least 10 min. If they feel they do not have symptoms, then return for a repeated measurement. Anybody with a temperature is not permitted to enter with other patients in the office to recheck their temperature. We have a small office space. If you have a separate room to seat the patient, it would be optimal. We have separated our seating to ensure at least 3 feet distance apart. On check in, there is only 1-2 pens sitting out. Once a person takes it uses and it returns it—we clean it! We have added a COVID-19 Questionnaire to the paperwork at check-in. We use regular surgical masks for well patients.

We are equipped with N95 and P100 masks. Our plan is to treat every red eye as if they potentially have COVID-19 in which we would gear up with the higher masks, face shield, and gowns. Ideally, we would have some type of eye protection/safety glasses under the face shield for increased protection. I am fortunate to have a registered nurse as an office manager, and she is the one we have designated to work up any potential COVID-19 cases. She and I would be the only two people in contact of the patient. I think it is important to have as little staff with the patients as possible and to minimize necessary equipment and potential contamination.

Some of you may not know the differences in masks and gloves. We do have 3 mil gloves/exam gloves for well patients. However, in the higher risk patients we have 9 mil gloves that are thicker and less likely to rip during examination. My husband and I are amateur wood workers and so we had various masks for cutting exotic woods; however, I have researched them even further given our current pandemic. The N95 masks filters out 95% of the particles in the air. The P-100 masks filters out 99.9% of particles, 0.3 microns or larger and is oil proof. These masks in the past were easily obtainable from woodworking shops and some specialty tool supply stores. Finding a mask today may not be as easy as an Amazon search, but by using creativity and calling around, you may be able to find enough to equip your office. We were also able to have a friend of the family make masks with our logos on it. All the proceeds go to fund activities for senior citizens in her community. She made sure they complied with CDC regulations. Our local medical supply store is currently getting daily shipments and have been able to provide N95 masks, not with a respirator, but still good enough to protect you and your staff.

Last, but most helpful, we have gone completely paperless. All medical history and forms are signed at home. We acquire a signature on an iPad that is sanitized after each patient and provide a stylus if needed. This has eliminated all ink pens and papers. Patients are happy that they are able to be seen a lot faster and they do not have to sit in the waiting area long before starting the pre-work up.

I hope this was able to at least give everyone some ideas of how we can “gear up” for this battle against coronavirus. Unfortunately, the battle with coronavirus will not be won overnight and at some point, we must find a new level of normalcy that involves us keeping everyone safe against COVID-19 and any future viruses, bacterial infections or pandemics that might come our way. I hope this helps shine a little light and help everyone reopen to better serve our patients and communities. Stay Safe and Stay Blessed!

