

Two Diagnoses: *Eye Condition Reveals Multiple Sclerosis*



Ask VSP network doctor Marty Carroll, O.D., to estimate the value of a yearly eye exam, and this cheerfully upbeat eye doctor won't mince his words.

"Take it from me, an annual eye exam can be absolutely priceless at times," booms the Cheyenne, Wyo., practitioner. "I'm talking about situations in which the eye doctor discovers the symptoms of a significant medical condition – and then quickly refers the patient to medical care.

"In that kind of situation, rapid intervention can protect quality of life or even help save a life. How can you measure the value of that?"

To illustrate his point – dramatically – Dr. Carroll describes a recent case in which a young mother of two children came in for a supposedly "routine" eye examination . . . and left with a doctor's referral that quickly pinpointed her early-stage multiple sclerosis (MS).

Until the visit to her family eye doctor, this 34-year-old mom had no inkling that she might be suffering from this chronic, potentially disabling illness – a disorder of the central nervous system that currently affects more than 300,000 Americans.

Caused by a variety of factors and so far incurable, MS can lead to increasing loss of muscular function, growing weakness and even total disability for patients who fail to have it diagnosed early and then treated effectively.

"When I examined the patient, she mentioned that she'd been experiencing some blurred vision and painful movement in one eye. She also reported a reduced ability to distinguish colors. As soon as I heard about those symptoms and also noticed that she had a discolored optic nerve, I went on double alert. Why? Because those indicators often signal the condition known as 'optic neuritis,' which is frequently associated with MS in younger female adults."

Although optic neuritis (chronic inflammation of the optic nerve) can also be triggered by viruses, bacteria or even autoimmune disorders such as lupus, the culprit often turns out to be MS, says Dr. Carroll. "Research shows that more than 55 percent of all MS patients will develop optic neuritis," he notes, "which is why I start looking for possible symptoms of MS whenever I learn a patient has inflammation of the optic nerve.



"In this young woman's case, I was able to refer her to a neurologist who made the MS diagnosis and got her started on an effective treatment program right away. This patient was very smart – because she schedules yearly eye exams for herself and her family."

Is Marty Carroll sold on the idea of regular, health-protecting eye examinations for all of his patients? "You bet!" he says with a determined grin. "Just think about it for a second. An eye exam takes only a few minutes, and then you can rest easy, knowing your vision is being protected.

"But what if that exam helps you uncover a medical condition that could vitally affect the quality of your life? How could you ever put a price tag on that?" •