

"Blurry" Eyes Signaled Dangerously *High Blood Pressure*



It was supposed to have been a routine eye exam for a patient who had complained that his vision seemed "blurred and fuzzy" at times.

But when VSP network doctor Richard A. ("Rick") Corcoran, O.D., carefully checked the patient's eyes, the word "routine" suddenly morphed into three other words.

Potential medical emergency.

"This patient was a 52-year-old sheet metal worker, and what I saw on his retina was a 'flame-shaped hemorrhage,'" Dr. Corcoran recalls today. "His left retina was actually awash in blood, and the flame shape told me that the bleeding was probably a symptom of high blood pressure.

"I knew the patient was being monitored for hypertension (the medical term for high blood pressure) . . . but I also knew he wasn't taking any medication for it, and that his medical doctor hadn't seen him for the past eight months."

Alerted by the blood that covered the surface of the "macula" (an area of light-sensitive tissue in the retina), Dr. Corcoran performed a quick vision test – and discovered that his patient's eyesight had deteriorated to 20-200 in his left eye.

"He was essentially blind in one eye, and that was all I needed to see," remembers Dr. Corcoran, who practices optometry in Marina, Calif. "At that point, I suspected that I was looking at a sign of extremely high blood pressure.

"After 25 years of experience, I could tell my patient was a heart attack or a stroke just waiting to happen. This was potentially a matter of life and death, so I responded accordingly."

While being careful not to unduly alarm the patient, Dr. Corcoran urged him to see both his family physician and a retinal specialist, that same day. Fortunately, the patient complied. Within a few days, he underwent emergency heart bypass surgery to correct the hypertension that had triggered the arterial blockage. He also began taking medication designed to lower the out-of-control blood pressure.

The operation went well, says Dr. Corcoran, and today the sheet metal worker has a clean bill of health. "He's back at work and enjoying good health," says the upbeat California eye doctor, "and whenever I see him, he credits me with saving his life. Really, I'm just glad he came in for his regular eye exam that day. As an optometrist, it's nice to know we can often do much more for people than prescribe glasses and contacts.

"It doesn't happen every day . . . but once in a while, you really do feel that you've been able to help save a life." •

