

Marketing the InfantSEE® program at the local level

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InfantSEE®, the American Optometric Association's (AOA's) public health program to provide comprehensive eye assessments to infants in the first year of life at no cost, has firmly taken root since its introduction in the summer of 2005. Nearly 7,500 AOA member optometrists across the nation have signed on to provide InfantSEE® assessments. By the end of 2006, between 75,000 and

American Optometric Association members should include an InfantSEE® public education program in their marketing plans this year.

100,000 InfantSEE® assessments had already been performed. That means InfantSEE® is making measurable progress toward its stated goal of making eye examinations an accepted part of infant care and increasing the percentage of American children who receive eye examinations before entering school (a minimal 14% before the start of the program). Moreover, recognition of undetected eye and vision problems as a potential cause of academic underperformance is increasing. Based in part on information about InfantSEE®, provided by the AOA Advocacy Group to the Surgeon General of the United States and to members of Congress, lawmakers in Washington, D.C., are considering the *Vision Care for Kids Act of 2007* (H.R. 507) to establish a grant program to provide vision care to children. Similar legislation has been enacted or introduced in a number of states.

InfantSEE®'s auspicious start should come as no surprise. The program could offer help in fighting one of the nation's greatest concerns—declining academic performance among the nation's school-age children. Moreover, the AOA, with the support of The Vision Care Institute of Johnson & Johnson Vision Care, Inc., has developed a nationwide public awareness campaign to encourage national media coverage and to promote a greater understand-

ing of the children's vision issue across the country. President Jimmy Carter and former First Lady Rosalynn Carter serve as the program's spokespersons. An impressive array of public relations tools are being utilized, including the InfantSEE® Web site (www.infantsee.org), television public service announcements, and media kits.

However, as the InfantSEE® program continues to develop, the importance of AOA member optometrists as not only the providers of infant eye examinations, but also as the spokespersons on children's vision issues at the local level is becoming increasingly apparent. For that reason, the InfantSEE® program will place an emphasis on public education at the local level in the coming months.

Horizontal integration

Years ago, people only went to the dentist when they had a toothache. Then, dentists set out to win acceptance for the periodic dental examination as a necessary part of health care for every American. Their effort has been an unqualified success. Their secret: dentists across the nation uniformly presented a consistent message to the public—regular dental examinations (every 6 months) will help prevent cavities and promote gum health.

If infant eye examinations are to become a widely recognized part of well-baby care, optometry must do much the same thing: deliver to the American public a consistent message that early detection is critical in preventing the development of early childhood eye problems.

With practitioners in virtually every county and community, optometrists are perhaps the most widely distributed group of health care professionals in the country. That means not only that optometrists have the unique ability to make infant eye care accessible across the nation but that optometry has a unique opportunity to deliver the InfantSEE® message in a uniform manner at the grassroots level across the nation.

But how can optometrists best promote this public health program in their communities? Fortunately, it is not difficult. The InfantSEE® public awareness campaign was designed from the start to be applicable at both the national and local levels. The AOA offers a wide variety of planning tools and public education materials to help AOA members conduct InfantSEE® awareness programs at the local level, all available through the InfantSEE® Web site. Here are some steps that can be highly effective in developing a

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successful, low-cost public awareness campaign for this exceptional public health program.

The message

The primary InfantSEE® message that must be delivered at both the national and local levels is early detection. The InfantSEE® Web site Parent's Center notes that 1 in every 10 children is at risk from undiagnosed eye and vision disorders. As in so many aspects of health care, early detection is critical to correcting potential problems as quickly as possible. Remember, the InfantSEE® program provides a comprehensive vision and eye health assessments for infants between 6 months and 12 months of age. Also remember, the first and most important rule of any integrated public education program is to "stay on message." Keep any communications or presentations on InfantSEE® relatively simple, stressing the basic points. The AOA's InfantSEE® materials, specifically designed to emphasize the importance of preventive eye care for young children, will make it easy.

The use of a few case histories can be helpful in illustrating the benefits of early childhood eye examinations. For example, the case of "Baby Gracie," who was first determined to have an eye problem during an InfantSEE® examination, highlights the importance of early detection. The eye problem was later confirmed to be retinoblastoma. In published interviews, the child's mother publicly thanked the InfantSEE® program for saving her baby girl's life. AOA InfantSEE® materials can be very helpful in describing real-life cases that illustrate the benefits of early childhood examinations. It is critical to explain *why* preventive eye examinations are important for children. Optometrists are familiar with amblyopia and other eye conditions that may develop in children and how these conditions might affect academic performance. Many parents, and even many health care professionals, are not aware. Such case histories can be important in instilling a basic sense of trust regarding early eye examinations.

Targeting the audience

Before designing any type of marketing or public education campaign, the target audience must be defined. The most obvious audience in most cases will be mothers, who in most families likely make the health care decisions. However, there is also an important secondary audience of health care providers: pediatricians, family physicians, pediatric nurse practitioners, and any other health care professionals that may be involved in infant care. Remember that optometrists understand children's vision problems; many health professionals do not. Depending on the community, there may be other appropriate target audiences (child care centers, educational institutions, local organizations). Once the target audiences have been established, internal and external marketing strategies can be determined for reaching those audiences. Some of these audiences may be difficult to reach, and it may possibly be more difficult to get them to

understand the value of infant eye examinations—but keep working on them.

Internal marketing

The best (and least expensive) way to introduce InfantSEE® in a community is internal promotion within the practice.

Staff

Start by involving everyone in the practice. Every practice employee who comes in contact with patients (and that most likely means everyone in the practice) should have the tools and information necessary to begin internal marketing. This, of course, means staff training. Consider dedicating an entire staff meeting to demonstrating the InfantSEE® assessment and explain the various tests used to determine vision disorders. Describe how this practice can lead to early detection and quite possibly save a child's vision or life.

Front Office

Prepare the front office personnel for the internal marketing campaign. In some cases, patients have called an optometric practice to schedule an InfantSEE® comprehensive eye assessment only to find that front office personnel had no idea that the optometrist even saw infants. Training of the front office personnel can be reinforced by displaying InfantSEE® materials in the reception area. Perhaps make a "Babies Welcome" sign and create a play area for kids in the office. These can be easy steps and often are very effective.

"Baby Packets"

Develop a "Baby Packet" for expectant mothers. Include a brochure on the InfantSEE® program and some information taken from the AOA Web page on children's vision. This information describes when and how a baby's visual system develops along with games parents can play to help stimulate that growing visual system. The packet can also include an InfantSEE® Awareness wristband (available for purchase at www.infantsee.org) and anything else that is felt to be important. A page about the practice and its doctors may also be appropriate.

External marketing

Efforts to create awareness of InfantSEE® at the local level do not require any significant additional expenses for a practice. In many cases they can simply be added on to current marketing efforts.

Patients

Practices that send out newsletters can include articles on the InfantSEE® program. A *Letter to Parents* is available for downloading on the InfantSEE® Web site. It can be mailed to a practice's current patient population for a minimal investment in postage. Practices that maintain

patient e-mail addresses can send the letter out with a mass e-mail. The practitioner can add a sentence or 2 to note involvement in the program.

Health Professionals

Get other health professionals on board. Take those baby packets you created in the office and deliver them to area OB/GYN offices, pediatricians, and family physicians. Include the sample *Letter to Pediatricians* available on the InfantSEE® Web site. If you are able to schedule a face-to-face meeting (perhaps over lunch), tell them what is involved in the InfantSEE® program. Ask them to encourage eye examinations as an important part of an infant's health care. As always, there may be a few "no responses"; however, most pediatricians will be receptive to the idea. As a general rule, pediatricians do not have the tools or training to diagnose eye and vision disorders—optometrists do. Most would appreciate another member of the health care team assisting them in that area of practice. Nobody is better with a retinoscope than someone in our profession. Emphasize that comprehensive infant eye and vision assessments complement the care that pediatricians offer and are not in any way intended to replace that care.

Child Care Centers

Another easy and inexpensive, but very effective, way to externally market the InfantSEE® program is to visit area child care centers and drop off flyers. Most child care centers are very receptive to information on programs like InfantSEE®. In most cases, InfantSEE® practitioners will be able to leave flyers at the front desk in child care centers for parents to select when they pick up their children. (Sometimes, a center may even be willing to hand out the flyers to the parents when they pick up their infants, which would even be more effective.) It is important to keep the message simple. Flyers should be no more than 1 sheet and only include a few items of information regarding the InfantSEE® program, such as those listed in the Parent's Center on the InfantSEE® Web site:

- ✓ Vision disorders are the fourth most common disability in the United States and the most prevalent handicapping condition during childhood.
- ✓ Only about 14% of children under the age of 6 are likely to have had an eye and vision examination.
- ✓ Pediatricians provide an important base-level eye screening that is designed to detect gross eye abnormalities. A comprehensive eye assessment by an optometrist is designed to detect much more and is an important part of well-baby care.

At the bottom of this flyer, provide the name and telephone number of the practice so parents can schedule an InfantSEE® assessment. When a practice gets a number of responses from a specific child care center, it may be a good idea to set aside a block of time to schedule those infants.

Familiar faces can provide an added sense of comfort when parents bring their infants in for their assessments. If possible, take it a step further and invite the local media to this infant's vision day. This may be an opportunity to reach a much broader audience.

Community Organizations

Rotary clubs, chambers of commerce, local health departments, local school parent-teacher organizations and many other community organizations often will be very receptive to a speaker (especially a local eye doctor) with information on a public health program. The AOA can provide a Community PowerPoint Presentation (free of charge) for members to use when speaking at local clubs.

Set a goal

It is essential in any marketing program to set targets so that the results of the program can be measured objectively (a step that is far too often overlooked). In some practices, the target may be 1 infant eye examination a week; in others, it may be 1 infant per month. The AOA suggests its members set a personal goal of doubling the number of InfantSEE® assessments performed in 2006 during 2007. Inform office staff of the practice's InfantSEE® goal so they can help the practice achieve it.

Top priority

AOA members should strongly consider positioning a local InfantSEE® public relations effort at the top of their "to do" lists for a couple of reasons. Recently, in his Practice Strategies column, "The Practice Management Consultant," Gary Gerber, O.D., emphasized that if optometrists are to build greater recognition for their practices and their profession, they must learn how to define themselves in the minds of patients and distinguish themselves from their competition. To do that, optometrists must better utilize marketing and management techniques that have already become commonplace in other fields of commerce. The local InfantSEE® public education program is a perfect example of the type of marketing program required. Practitioners who have not yet instituted formal marketing plans in their practices may wish to consider InfantSEE® education programs as an easy start. Marketing campaigns often are intended to either introduce a new product or service or to develop new patients through branding and other means. The InfantSEE® marketing campaign can accomplish both of these goals. Realize that in developing an InfantSEE® campaign, the practice will be spending time and small amounts of money on a program that may not actually generate any income initially. Evaluate this program's value as a means of promoting the profession of optometry. Many practitioners will be surprised at how many family members and friends will seek out a practice as a result of the goodwill generated by the doctor's involvement in a program such as InfantSEE®.

More importantly, the InfantSEE® program addresses a critical need, and the development of an InfantSEE® program is simply a rewarding endeavor for an optometrist. The fact is that InfantSEE® assessments will help detect vision and eye health issues sooner in children. It may not always happen at the initial infant evaluation, but it may during subsequent examinations.

AOA members who have not yet joined the InfantSEE® program should consider signing up. Such practitioners often cite potential problems that can arise with caring for very young children in a practice. However, providing InfantSEE® assessments should not be intimidating. Look over the AOA InfantSEE® examination form (available on the InfantSEE® Web site) to be comfortable with what is involved during this no-cost eye and vision evaluation. Attend a workshop if one is available in your area or look for one at the next conference you attend. Practitioners who have not provided infant examinations in awhile may wish to practice on the children of family or friends to get in a "comfort zone" with respect to providing infant care. The AOA even offers a Good-Lite Kit that includes the Lea Grating Paddles and some other tools useful in providing infant vision evaluations to InfantSEE® patients.

AOA members who are already participating in the program should be sure to complete and return their InfantSEE® clinical assessment forms so the AOA can document the role early diagnosis can play in preventing eye and vision conditions. Participating AOA members should check the AOA InfantSEE® Web site and their AOA InfantSEE® Provider E-Newsletters for new ideas and materials for marketing the InfantSEE® program.

The AOA has developed a comprehensive and effective strategy for delivery of the InfantSEE® message at the national level. However, the key to success will be AOA members working at the local level. The AOA will continue to develop new ideas and tools to help ensure the continuing success of this program. The important thing is for everyone to get on board with InfantSEE®. Educate staff, other practitioners, and the public. Being proactive in promoting InfantSEE® will help an optometric office develop a strong relationship with pediatric patients and their families. Just as when being proactive in discussing new technology in the contact lens arena, explain how optometry has stepped up to fill this underserved infant population at risk for vision problems. By promoting this much-needed public health program, optometry will fill a void in children's eye care.