Successful Neuro-Optometric Rehabilitation (NOR) in a Patient with Long-Term Post-Concussion Visual Symptoms

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ABSTRACT
Over the past decade, neuro-optometric rehabilitation (NOR) has been demonstrated to improve visual skills and reduce visual symptoms in patients with mild traumatic brain injury (mTBI)/concussion. In the present case report in an adolescent with a sports-related concussion and a range of related long-term visual symptoms, there are two unique aspects: (1) it details and demonstrates the efficacy of NOR one year post-injury, and (2) it suggests that the results of NOR may be an additional predictor of return-to-play.

INTRODUCTION
The diagnosis and management of concussion, a type of mild traumatic brain injury, has been an increasingly important area in optometric care. Awareness of post-concussion syndrome has been made more visible due to increased media coverage and the recognition of sports-related head injury. Individuals with post-concussion syndrome often manifest a range of visually-based symptoms, including headaches, photosensitivity, reading problems, visual motion sensitivity, intermittent blur, diplopia, and oculomotor deficits such as difficulty with visual tracking. Previous studies have estimated that up to 90% of post-concussion patients who remain visually symptomatic for an extended period exhibit some type of versional oculomotor dysfunction, vergence problem, and/or accommodative deficit. Therefore, proper vision assessment and care in this population is crucial for recovery and a good quality-of-life (QOL).

Often times, sports medicine specialists are on the front lines of assessing these patients following their acute-phase concussion, and then throughout their recovery. One tool that is commonly used in the athletic community to assess the concussive status and track recovery is the Immediate Post Concussion Assessment and Cognitive Testing (ImPACT). ImPACT involves a series of neurocognitive tests that were specifically developed to evaluate areas of possible deficit in sports-related concussions. These include several areas, such as attention span, motor processing speed, reaction time, working memory, non-verbal problem solving, and impulse control. ImPACT is also widely used as a tool to decide return-to-play.

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Keywords: concussion, ImPACT testing, mild traumatic brain injury, neuro-optometric rehabilitation (NOR), photosensitivity, return-to-play, visual motion sensitivity, vision rehabilitation, vision therapy
This case report details the neuro-optometric evaluation and rehabilitation as an additional tool to assess visual recovery and return-to-play. It demonstrates the success of NOR to reduce longstanding, post-concussion visual symptoms. The unique aspects of this case include the long duration for which the patient was visually symptomatic prior to the initiation of NOR, as well as the possible limitation of ImPACT testing alone in the determination of return-to-play.

**CASE SUMMARY**

“MF” was a 17 year-old-female who presented to our office for a neuro-optometric evaluation by referral of a sports medicine physician. The patient had suffered a concussion 12 months prior to her neuro-optometric evaluation, which was her first and only diagnosed concussion. The incident occurred while playing soccer, when she collided in midair with another player, and then lost consciousness for one minute. The next day she was diagnosed with a concussion by a sports medicine physician. At that visit, she completed her first post-concussion ImPACT test, which she failed solely due to slow reaction time compared to her baseline (pre-injury) ImPACT. Prior to her appointment with our office, the patient had completed a formal physical therapy and a formal vestibular therapy program, which did not alleviate her post-concussion vision symptoms. She was cleared for non-contact sports and related exercise activities three months after the concussion.

When reading, MF reported that the letters appeared to move, shimmer, and jump on the page, and sometimes double. MF used to love to read, but since the concussion she no longer did. She now skipped lines, read more slowly, and lost her place more often when reading than prior to her concussion. MF experienced headaches most of the time. In the morning, her headaches were a 2-3 on a scale of 10, and they increased to a 5-6 throughout the day. Her headaches were exacerbated with reading, presence of background noise, and when in busy visual environments (e.g., crowded school hallways, malls, etc.). The headaches were localized over her eyes and temples. Additionally, busy visual environments caused MF to become nauseous, which did not occur prior to the concussion. However, MF had a long history of motion sickness, which worsened since the concussion.

A complete neuro-optometric evaluation was performed, which included pupil, visual field, tonometry, biomicroscopy, and fundus examination. The results of these specific tests were unremarkable. A summary of the remaining aspects of the vision evaluation is included in Table 1, with all but two of the findings being outside of normal limits.

At the initial evaluation, the COVD Quality-of-Life (QOL) survey was also administered. Her score was 46, which indicated the presence of considerable visual symptoms. Furthermore, only nine of the thirty question responses were in the “never” or “seldom” category. The survey has been used as a tool to assess impediments to academic performance and demonstrate the effectiveness of vision therapy. The COVD-QOL survey shows promise as a quantitative measure of post-concussion syndrome, as well as a pre-/post-NOR measure of progress.

**DIAGNOSIS**

There were multiple abnormal clinical signs and visual diagnoses made at the initial assessment (Table 1). For example, MF exhibited a receded near point of convergence, as well as reduced convergence and divergence fusional ranges at both distance and near, and other related deficits. Additionally, based on the Visagraph Reading Eye Movement Test, which was administered at the reading level, her eye movement-based reading efficiency placed her at a first-grade reading level (Table 2). All of the findings were well outside the expected age norms. In contrast, the DEM findings before and after NOR were all within the normal limits (Table 3).

MF also reported general and visual discomfort when tested with an optokinetic nystagmus
drum rotated in her peripheral visual field, which created Gibsonian optic flow.\textsuperscript{11,12} She also reported specific photosensitivity, including increased symptoms in fluorescent lighting and while viewing computer screens. Based on these findings, MF was diagnosed with convergence insufficiency, fusional instability, oculomotor dysfunction, accommodative insufficiency, accommodative infacility, visual motion sensitivity, and photosensitivity.

**Treatment Plan**

For her treatment plan, MF was prescribed a spectacle correction for near vision, as well as a BPI Omega tint (85% transmission). This tint alleviated a degree of her visual motion sensitivity and much of her specific photosensitivity.
symptoms. She was also prescribed a program of NOR. It was administered in-office and consisted of 40 minute sessions, twice per week. She completed 21 sessions over a period of 12 weeks (16 hours total). Home NOR using similar techniques was dispensed upon the completion of her in-office sessions. The goal of the NOR was to improve vergence, accommodation, visual-vestibular integration, high-level visual processing, and selective and sustained visual attention.

### Table 4. Examples of NOR techniques used in each phase of treatment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 1: Visual Stabilization</th>
<th>Phase 2: Binocular Visual Integration</th>
<th>Phase 3: Visual Automaticity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monocular Accommodative Rock</td>
<td>Binocular Accommodative Rock with red/green bar reader</td>
<td>Phase 2 activities incorporating VOR, balance board and metronome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monocular Near-Far Hart Chart</td>
<td>Near-Far Hart Chart Decoding</td>
<td>Syntons and OPT Light Therapy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brock String, Beading for Convergence</td>
<td>Brock String with prism flippers, +/- lenses</td>
<td>Alternating BI and BO Aperture Rule with VOR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vectograms Extension of Ranges (Quoits, Clown)</td>
<td>Vergence Jumps with Double Vectograms (Quoits and Clown)</td>
<td>Aperture Rule with look-aways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer RDS (VTS3, HTS)</td>
<td>RDS jump ductions (near, intermediate, distance projected)</td>
<td>BOP/BIM with Vectograms, and computer RDS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marsden Ball Pursuit Activities</td>
<td>Marsden ball with yoked prism</td>
<td>Michigan Tracking with +/- lenses, prism flippers, and added metronome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hart Chart Saccades, Michigan Tracking</td>
<td>Michigan tracking with +/- lenses, prism flippers</td>
<td>ACE Reader Span</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MFBF tracking/scan</td>
<td>MFBF Visual Search and Scan</td>
<td>Sanet Visual Integrator (SVI) with multisensory integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTS II Visual Search and Scan</td>
<td>Dynamic Reader / Visual Search and scan with prism and accommodative flippers</td>
<td>Faster speeds, adding to the number of stimuli and distractors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 5: Pre-Post-NOR findings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Pre VT</th>
<th>After 12 VT Sessions</th>
<th>Post VT (21 Sessions)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Distance Phoria (cover test)</td>
<td>ortho</td>
<td>ortho</td>
<td>ortho</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Near Phoria (cover test)</td>
<td>3 pd esophoria</td>
<td>3 pd esophoria</td>
<td>3 pd esophoria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nearpoint of Convergence (accommodative target)</td>
<td>4 inches</td>
<td>2 inches</td>
<td>1 inch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Near Convergence Range</td>
<td>10/14/6 pd</td>
<td>18/22/10 pd</td>
<td>24/36/20 pd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Near Divergence Range</td>
<td>12/16/10 pd</td>
<td>12/24/12 pd</td>
<td>16/26/16 pd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance Convergence Range</td>
<td>4/6/0 pd</td>
<td>x/6/1 pd</td>
<td>12/18/10 pd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance Divergence Range</td>
<td>x/6/2 pd</td>
<td>x/8/4 pd</td>
<td>x/10/6 pd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vergence Facility (12pd BO/3pd BI)</td>
<td>3 cpm, fails BO</td>
<td>14 cpm</td>
<td>25 cpm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance Fusional Facility (4pd BO/2pd BI)</td>
<td>3 cpm, fails BI</td>
<td>9 cpm</td>
<td>22 cpm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodative Facility (+/- 2.00D)</td>
<td>RE: 2 cpm, fails plus LE: 5 cpm, fails plus</td>
<td>RE: 10 cpm LE: 11 cpm</td>
<td>RE: 16 cpm LE: 17 cpm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodative Amplitude (Minus lens)</td>
<td>RE: 7.50 D LE: 6.50 D</td>
<td>RE: 8.50 D LE: 9.00 D</td>
<td>RE: 11.00 D LE: 11.50 D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pursuit Eye Movements</td>
<td>+2 w/ head movement</td>
<td>+4</td>
<td>+4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saccadic Eye Movements</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visagraph Reading Eye Movement Test (Level 10)</td>
<td>1.0 grade level efficiency</td>
<td>13.5 grade level efficiency</td>
<td>13.5 grade level efficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental Eye Movement Test (DEM)</td>
<td>Ratio: 47th %ile Errors: 61st %ile</td>
<td>Ratio: 75th %ile Errors: 77th %ile</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test of Silent Word Reading Fluency</td>
<td>5th %ile</td>
<td>63rd %ile</td>
<td>63rd %ile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simultaneous Visual Memory: Tachistoscope</td>
<td>13th %ile</td>
<td>25th %ile</td>
<td>25th %ile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sequential Visual Memory: Visual Span</td>
<td>38th %ile</td>
<td>88th %ile</td>
<td>88th %ile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Life Symptom Survey</td>
<td>46</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Her NOR plan was divided into three phases, each with its own goal. This plan is outlined in Table 4. In phase 1, the goal is visual stabilization. In this initial stage, the therapy focuses on building monocular accommodative and oculomotor skills. More basic binocular skills are trained as well. This includes divergence and convergence ranges at both distance and near, and working toward rapid, symptom-free, vergence facility ability. There were no adverse effects or symptoms during this monocular training phase. In phase 2, the goal is binocular visual integration. This phase focuses on binocular accommodative facility and amplitude, as well as binocular oculomotor skills. In the later stages of phase 2, integrative accommodative and vergence tasks are added, such as BIM/BOP, to work towards visual automaticity, which is the ultimate goal of phase 3. This final phase involves integration of the visual system with multiple sensory systems, such as auditory, vestibular, tactile, with progressively higher demands, and executed with automaticity.

Re-Evaluations and Outcomes

After the first 12 NOR sessions, the patient passed the post-ImPACT test for the first time since her concussion. However, our optometric testing indicated that visual recovery was not complete (Table 5); furthermore, while MF's symptoms had lessened, she still remained visually symptomatic. In consultation with her sports medicine physician, the patient was advised not to return-to-play at that time.

At the completion of the 21 sessions of vision therapy, however, her clinical visual findings improved dramatically (Table 5), with marked reduction of symptoms as assessed by the COVD-QOL survey. Her score was now reduced to 15, which suggested being relatively symptom free. Additionally, nearly all question responses (28 out of 30) were in the “never” or “seldom” category. And, all of her Visagraph findings were now in the expected age norms (Table 2). She was then cleared for unrestricted return-to-play by both her sports medicine physician and us.

Ten weeks after the completion of NOR, MF's clinical findings remained similar to her initial post-NOR results. She reported that her reading comprehension score on the SAT now improved by 50 points, and her post-concussion visual symptoms had completely resolved.

DISCUSSION

Current post-concussion, return-to-play protocols alone may not be sufficient to assess adequately post-concussion visual recovery. After passing her post-concussion ImPACT testing, and being cleared to play by her sports medicine physician, MF was still visually-symptomatic, and her sensorimotor visual skills remained impaired. Based on this information, her sports medicine physician delayed return-to-play after consulting with us. This is consistent with the patient having several risk factors for a second concussion, such as gender, age, type of sport, and history of a concussion, with the last factor being the best predictor for getting a subsequent concussion. Interestingly, this is consistent with the theme and message of the present paper.

After an additional nine NOR sessions focusing on binocular integration and visual automaticity, MF was now symptom-free with normalized visual findings. Neuro-optometric evaluation and the NOR results have the potential to predict a more complete and global recovery, at least in some patients. Thus, we suggest it be used in concert with neuro-psychological tools such as ImPACT. This is logical when the high prevalence of symptomatic visual deficits after concussion is considered.

There is growing evidence that NOR can improve/normalize visual skills and significantly reduce symptoms in patients following mild traumatic brain injury, such as concussion. It is important to note that in the present case, the patient consistently suffered from post-concussion, visual symptoms for one year prior to NOR. Nonetheless, the three-phase approach...
of the NOR was very successful in eliminating the post-concussion visual symptoms and normalizing the clinical visual findings. The present findings, as well as other positive laboratory studies and clinical trials, suggest there may be no post-injury time limit to obtain some degree of visual recovery. Further research in this important area is needed, especially longitudinal ones using objective recording techniques of vision function. This case illustrates the frequent persistence of post-concussion visual symptoms, the robust nature of NOR in treating these patients, and the new potential role of NOR in determining return-to-play.

Lastly, it is interesting to speculate that NOR may have a “neuro-protective effect (NPE)” on the human visual system. In its general usage, a NPE refers to some early intervention (e.g., pharmacologic) that slows or even reverses neural loss at the cellular level over time, thus preserving some degree of structure and function that might otherwise be lost. How might this concept be broadly applied to the visual system in these patients? We speculate that when NOR is introduced as an early and aggressive intervention, it may act to reduce, or even prevent, the adverse visual consequences of a subsequent concussion. That is, NOR may make the concussed individual more “resistant/resilient” to, and thus reduce the risk of, any new visual sequelae from a subsequent concussion. For example, assume that the adverse visual effect of the original concussion was primarily a vergence dysfunction, such as convergence insufficiency. Then the goal of NOR would be to exceed the standard, normal clinical vergence parameters, such as horizontal vergence ranges at near, by 50% or more. Hence, when a subsequent concussion occurs, the effect on the vergence system might now be reduced or even non-existent. For example, following the new insult, the formerly 150% performing vergence system would now be reduced to 120% but not below 100%, and thus without the occurrence of any new visual symptoms. This novel idea requires further clinical and laboratory testing for confirmation.

REFERENCES


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