

Viewpoint

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Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons

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A New Landmark for Vision Care: The Robert Burch Family Eye Center Opens at Lincoln Center



James McKiernan, MD (left), the Burch family (center), and G.A. (Jack) Cioffi, MD, with Robert and Dale Burch (right).

The new Robert Burch Family Eye Center at Lincoln Center radiates calm and light, a serene environment where natural materials, carefully chosen artwork, and advanced technology come together to create an exceptional patient experience. On October 6, 2025, members of the Burch family joined Columbia faculty, leaders, and friends to celebrate the grand opening of the Department of Ophthalmology's new flagship clinical facility at 37 West 65th Street,

which represents the newest chapter in the Burch family's extraordinary legacy of philanthropy and vision at Columbia.

Made possible through the generosity of Robert Burch III and his wife Dale, the new facility reflects their decades-long partnership with the Department of Ophthalmology and their deep personal gratitude to Stanley Chang, MD, the K.K. Tse and Ku Teh Ying Professor of Ophthalmology and the

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A Life of Vision and Gratitude: The Story of Danny H.-Kauffmann Jokl, MD

For Danny H.-Kauffmann Jokl, MD, his lifetime in medicine has been defined by gratitude, both for the opportunities he has been given and for the chance to create opportunities for others.

"I have long been searching for a way to give back to the United States," he says. "This country gave my family everything: education, freedom, and a place to call home. We came here with nothing, and I wanted to find a way to express my gratitude."

Born in Berlin, Germany, Dr. Jokl immigrated to New York City with his parents in 1941, when he was a small boy. "My parents had ten dollars each in their pockets," he

recalls. His father worked as a door-to-door salesman, while his mother, a practical nurse, eventually became a registered nurse—both achievements, he notes, "a cause for family pride."

The family had little money but an abundance of determination. "New York gave us all we needed: schools, libraries, resources. You just had to work hard enough to take advantage of them," he says. That work ethic carried him through elementary school in the Inwood section of upper Manhattan, Bronx High School of Science, City College of New York, medical school at the University of Kentucky, and an internship at Philadelphia General

Hospital, where with 90 other interns he cared for the city's poorest patients. Then came an experience that would test both his courage and his judgment.

After medical school, during the Vietnam War, Dr. Jokl served as a Navy medical officer and was eventually assigned as acting medical officer for the US Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean. "We had a meningitis outbreak on one of our ships," he recalls. "Navy regulations at the time said that under no circumstances should medication be given until the infection was positively identified, but we didn't have the resources to culture or test. Waiting could have cost lives."

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Dear Friends,

Today, we find ourselves at a crossroads for biomedical discovery, not only in ophthalmology but across the academic medical enterprise. Over the years, the Edward S. Harkness Eye Institute and the Department of Ophthalmology at Columbia have earned their place among the nation's elite vision science centers, thanks in large part to the reliable NIH support that has covered 60% to 80% of our research budget in typical years. Our investigators have advanced breakthroughs in imaging, genetics, regenerative therapies, and translational science precisely because of that sustained federal commitment.

But early in 2025, that foundation was shaken. In March, nearly \$400 million in federal grants and contracts to Columbia were abruptly suspended, in a blow that cut into the lifeblood of labs, threatened key projects, and destabilized long-term planning. For much of the first half of the year, our research laboratories operated in a landscape of profound uncertainty, struggling to keep critical personnel, experiments, and momentum afloat without the predictable flow of NIH funding.



While the University has since reached a resolution with the federal government that restores eligibility for most NIH and other grants, the recovery is far from complete. We are, in truth, navigating fragile ground. Funding streams are restarting slowly, commitments remain under review, and the memory of how quickly support can vanish continues to weigh heavily on our faculty. The turbulence of these past months underscores just how precarious the future of discovery can be when so much depends on decisions beyond our control.

In this issue of *Viewpoint*, we feature "Voices of the Investigators," in which leaders across our faculty—from rising mid-career scientists to seasoned investigators—offer candid reflections on how the funding crisis affected their labs and their mindset about the future of discovery. Their perspectives remind us that philanthropy is not just an accelerator of progress but the very safeguard that ensures our mission can endure.

That truth is vividly illustrated by our cover feature: the October 6th grand opening of the Robert Burch Family Eye Center at Lincoln Center. This new clinic space, a modern hub for patient care and education made possible through the extraordinary generosity of the Burch family, represents exactly the kind of steadfast, visionary support that sustains Columbia Ophthalmology through times of uncertainty.

The success of our fourth Precision Ophthalmology™ Conference, held this June, captured both the pace of discovery and the depth of collaboration that make our department unique. Over three days, our scientists, clinicians, and trainees, joined by colleagues from around the world, explored genetics, data science, regenerative medicine, and patient-specific therapies. It was a vivid reminder that our strength lies not only in what we study, but in how we study it—together.

That same spirit of discovery and generosity runs through so many of the stories in this issue of *Viewpoint*. We celebrate the

establishment of the Danny H.-Kauffmann-Jokl, MD, Professorship of Neuro-Ophthalmology and the appointment of Jeffrey Odel, MD, as its inaugural holder. This new endowed chair, created through the generosity of Dr. Jokl, will ensure that Columbia continues to lead in advancing the care and science of neuro-ophthalmology for generations to come, and we celebrate his values and contributions in a feature profile focused on his inspiring career.

This year's Abraham Spector Prize Lecture and Symposium, which pays tribute to the pioneering biochemist whose work illuminated the structure and function of the lens, reminds us how foundational discoveries like his continue to shape the modern landscape of ophthalmic research.

I'm also delighted to share updates from The One in Westchester, where new facilities and an expanding team of subspecialists are bringing world-class care closer to home for patients throughout the region. Our Clinical Faculty Roundup highlights recent additions to our faculty, as well as distinctions and honors that reflect the breadth of expertise across our department. And our Grants and Awards section celebrates the recognition our investigators continue to earn for their groundbreaking work in retinal biology, glaucoma, and corneal innovation.

Finally, our "Making History at Harkness" column celebrates Jane Heffner, our longtime Executive Director of Development, who retired in December after 22 years of extraordinary service to Columbia Ophthalmology. Jane's vision, dedication, and deep personal investment in our mission have transformed what philanthropy means within this department. She has helped build relationships that are rooted in trust and shared purpose, connecting donors and friends to the breakthroughs and people that make Columbia so special. Her leadership and grace have been integral to every success we highlight in these pages, and we will miss her profoundly.

As the landscape of biomedical research grows more complex and federal support increasingly uncertain, the partnership of our philanthropic community has never been more vital. The discoveries we celebrate depend on the stability that philanthropy provides. Your generosity allows us to sustain momentum when grants falter, to invest in new investigators and technologies, and to ensure that every advance ultimately reaches the patients who need it most. For that steadfast belief in our mission, I am deeply grateful.

Sincerely,

G.A. (Jack) Cioffi, MD
Jean and Richard Deems Professor
Edward S. Harkness Professor
Chairman, Department of Ophthalmology

CLINICAL SPOTLIGHT

Columbia Ophthalmology Opens New State-of-the-Art Facility at The One in Westchester

Columbia Ophthalmology has opened a major new clinical site at NewYork-Presbyterian The One in White Plains, expanding access to advanced eye care for patients throughout Westchester and the Hudson Valley. Opened in early September, the state-of-the-art facility brings together multiple subspecialties—including cornea, glaucoma, pediatric ophthalmology, neuro-ophthalmology, and optometry—within a single, modern setting, designed to enhance collaboration and patient experience.

"The One is truly a world-class facility," says George J. Florakis, MD, Malcolm P. Aldrich Clinical Professor of Ophthalmology and Division Director of Columbia Ophthalmology in Westchester. "It's bright, spacious, and equipped with the most advanced technology anywhere, from precision

diagnostic imaging to state-of-the-art surgical suites. These operating rooms are some of the best I've ever worked in. Every detail was designed for comfort, efficiency, and patient experience. And it's remarkably convenient, right off all the major highways, so patients from across Westchester and beyond can reach us easily."

Ophthalmology is housed on the second of four floors in the 260,000-square-foot facility, which also has multiple Columbia and NewYork-Presbyterian specialty practices. The department's new space includes 12 exam rooms and the latest diagnostic and surgical technology.

The One is home to a multidisciplinary team representing nearly every subspecialty in ophthalmology:

- **Cornea:** Dr. Florakis and Gabriel Rand, MD, Assistant Professor of Ophthalmology

- **Comprehensive Ophthalmology, Glaucoma and Optometry:** Portia Sirinek, MD, Assistant Clinical Ophthalmologist, and Christina Cherny, OD, Assistant Clinical Optometrist

- **Pediatric Ophthalmology:** Daphna Mezaad, MD, Associate Professor of Ophthalmology

- **Neuro-Ophthalmology:** Scott Forman, MD, Associate Clinical Ophthalmologist

"This is the first time we've had so many subspecialists practicing together in Westchester," Dr. Florakis says. "Dr. Rand and I have cared for cornea patients here for years, but now that we

have this larger team in place, it is much easier to collaborate, and that's a huge advantage for patient care."

Assistant Clinical Ophthalmologist Portia Sirinek, MD, a former Department of Ophthalmology resident who recently rejoined Columbia after several years of practice in Boston, notes that the design



The One in Westchester, home to Columbia Ophthalmology and other specialty services.

and technology support both efficiency and excellence. "The facility is absolutely beautiful and thoughtfully designed," she says. "We have all new equipment, some of it so new that no one else in the region is using it yet. Patients are excited that they can get truly comprehensive care without having to travel into Manhattan."

Christina Cherny, OD, adds that the shared space allows seamless co-management of complex cases. "I work closely with Drs. Florakis and Rand to care for cornea patients who've had transplants or other major surgeries," she says. "We share imaging and lens-fitting data in real time, so everything can happen in one coordinated visit."

Patient convenience and comfort are top priorities. The One offers free valet parking, easy highway access, and a calm, light-filled environment. "People tell me it's the friendliest medical environment they've ever been in," Dr. Florakis says. "You can feel the difference right away. The staff are engaged, the technology is state-of-the-art, and the workflow just works."

Scheduling has also been streamlined. "Our new facility are building their practices, so it's easier for new patients to get appointments quickly," he notes. "And when urgent issues arise, we can see those patients the same day. Collaboration among colleagues makes that possible."

Another key advantage is proximity to other Columbia specialties located within The One. "Ophthalmology is right next to cardiology, orthopedics, and ENT," Dr. Florakis says. "If I have a pre-surgical patient with a cardiac issue, I can literally step next door and talk to the cardiologist. That kind of interaction improves patient care."

Dr. Sirinek agrees. "Having other departments right here makes a real difference," she says. "It allows us to approach complex cases as a unified medical team."

The new space also extends Columbia's academic mission. The department plans to host residents and fellows at The One, giving trainees exposure to a high-volume suburban setting with the same level of academic rigor as the Manhattan campus.

"The One is a model for what modern clinical practice should look like: efficient, collegial, and patient-focused," Dr. Florakis says. "It brings Columbia Ophthalmology closer to the communities we serve while maintaining the highest standards of care."

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Columbia Strengthens Neuro-Ophthalmology With New Endowed Professorship

The Department of Ophthalmology has established the Danny H.-Kauffmann-Jokl, MD, Professorship of Neuro-Ophthalmology, marking a major investment in a subspecialty that links vision and brain science. Longtime faculty member Jeffrey Odel, MD, has been appointed the inaugural holder of the professorship, made possible with the generous support of Danny H.-Kauffmann Jokl, MD, a Columbia faculty member, innovator in vitreoretinal surgery, and lifelong advocate for advances in ophthalmology.

Along with previously established Danny H.-Kauffmann Jokl, MD, Neuro-Ophthalmology Fellowship, the new professorship provides sustainable funding for a field whose work depends on deep diagnostic expertise rather than procedural volume. “This is a transformative gift,” Dr. Odel says. “Neuro-ophthalmology has always been academically rich but financially vulnerable. Dr. Jokl’s support gives us the stability to train new physicians, pursue research, and expand our collaboration across the medical center.”

Unlike surgical subspecialties, neuro-ophthalmology is defined by detective work. “We’re not operating. We’re solving puzzles,” Dr. Odel explains. “Our patients often have unusual combinations of visual and neurologic symptoms, and we must determine whether the problem belongs in neurology, neurosurgery, ophthalmology, or medicine. Across the country, neuro-ophthalmology is a ‘loss leader,’” he says. “This endowment lifts that pressure and lets us focus on teaching, research, and patient access.”

The new funding has already begun to expand training capacity. “Now we can offer proper fellowships and attract bright young people who otherwise couldn’t afford to specialize in this area.” Dr. Odel says. “We are very grateful for this transformative gift.”

This academic year, Columbia’s neuro-ophthalmology service includes a fellow and two medical students, and the team is producing multiple abstracts for national presentation, which is an output level not seen in years, Dr. Odel says. “That kind of scholarship multiplies. When fellows are publishing and presenting, the visibility of the field grows.”

From Stability to Discovery

Fueled by Dr. Jokl’s generosity, Dr. Odel has major plans to revitalize the subspecialty’s research mission. “This gift lets us think big again,” he says. “We can pursue projects that link ophthalmology to the broader neurosciences and all of medicine, areas that have always been part of Columbia’s DNA.”

In the 1980s, when the funding model supported four neuro-ophthalmology fellows sponsored by the Department, “We produced an incredible amount of material that changed the landscape of neuro-ophthalmology,” Dr. Odel says. For example, he published landmark work on non-invasive sleep testing for myasthenia gravis (MG), reporting that improvement in symptoms such as eyelid drooping (ptosis) and double vision (diplopia) after the rest period, followed by their re-emergence in the minutes afterward, is a positive indicator for MG.

“I also sent a fellow to Cuba during the epidemic of nutritional amblyopia in the 1990s, and he had an encounter with Fidel Castro,” he recalls. Characterized by both optic and peripheral forms of neuropathy, the outbreak affected some 50,000 people. “Castro believed that the US had sent a virus that was causing this outbreak of eye problems, but I had just been reading a book on nutritional disorders of the nervous system that described an epidemic in the Caribbean in the 1890s, where nutritional deficiencies led to an outbreak of blindness. My fellow traveled to Cuba with Dr. Michio Hirano [now the Chief of

the Neuromuscular Medicine Division at CUIMC], and they found that we were right: the epidemic was primarily caused by severe nutritional deficiencies. We were able to bring it under control through vitamin supplementation.”

Dr. Odel’s team also produced multiple papers with the neurovascular service and developed diagnostic criteria for the eye-related symptoms of a rare systemic infectious disorder called Whipple’s disease. “These are projects that take time, mentorship, and careful analysis,” Dr. Odel says. “Before, we were running at full speed clinically, with little margin for research. Now we can return to balancing patient care with scientific inquiry, the way an academic department should.”

The gift perfectly reflects its donor’s character, Dr. Odel says. “Danny could have endowed a retina chair, because that’s where he made his mark, but he chose the discipline that speaks to his intellectual heart. That’s who he is: curious, generous, and deeply principled.”

Looking ahead, both doctors see a bright future for the field. “Neuro-ophthalmology will drive the next great advances, especially as genetics and artificial intelligence come together. We’re at the beginning of a new era,” Dr. Jokl says.



Chair G.A. (Jack) Cioffi, MD (left), congratulates Jeffrey Odel, MD, inaugural holder of the Danny H.-Kauffmann-Jokl, MD, Professorship of Neuro-Ophthalmology.

Dr. Odel agrees. “Neuro-ophthalmology is the connective tissue of medicine. It links vision, neurology, and systemic disease,” he says. “With the stability that Danny’s gift provides, Columbia can remain at the forefront of discovery for decades to come.”

Voices of the Investigators

For nearly a year, scientists at Columbia University Irving Medical Center’s Department of Ophthalmology have been operating under a cloud of uncertainty. Since January of 2025, the National Institutes of Health—the backbone of US medical research—has been hobbled by regulatory and administrative upheaval that has delayed funding decisions and halted thousands of grant reviews. Over the first part of the year, dozens of NIH study section meetings were cancelled or postponed, affecting an estimated 16,000 grant applications competing for \$1.5 billion in support. Some delays stemmed from lapses in posting legally required notices for review panels, while others reflected broader freezes on federal spending; some grants were canceled altogether.

“That kind of upheaval doesn’t just stop individual projects; it discourages long-term planning and risk-taking, especially for younger scientists,” says Xin Zhang, PhD, Director of Vision Science Research and Malcolm P. Aldrich Research Professor of Ophthalmic Science.

The instability has tested even well-established laboratories. “When the entire system slows down, the effects are immediate. Projects stall, hiring pauses, and collaboration timelines start to slip,” he says. “The most difficult part is uncertainty. Investigators can adapt to limited budgets, but they can’t plan around unpredictability.”

Still, he emphasized the department’s resilience. “We’ve been through difficult funding times before, and what helps is working together,” Dr. Zhang says. “We’ve encouraged our investigators to collaborate more closely, share core resources, and build partnerships with industry and philanthropy.”

For laboratories built on continuity and steady progress, these delays have been deeply destabilizing. “Each delay snowballs,” says Revathi Balasubramanian, PhD, Assistant Professor of Ophthalmology. “When a review cycle is postponed, it pushes back resubmissions and decisions by months.”

Within Columbia Ophthalmology, the funding uncertainty has touched every tier of research. Senior investigators who have spent decades building federally supported programs now find themselves confronting a challenge they never expected: how to preserve hard-won expertise, sustain staff, and protect lines of inquiry that may take years to yield breakthroughs.

“Federal research support has always been cyclical,” says Janet R. Sparrow, PhD, Anthony Donn Professor of Ophthalmic Science (in Ophthalmology) and Professor of Pathology & Cell Biology, “but what’s different now is the unpredictability. You can’t plan the next stage of a project if you don’t know when—or if—the next review will happen. We depend on being able to plan years in advance, and when that becomes impossible, it’s very difficult to sustain momentum. It’s demoralizing for people who have done everything right.”

That unpredictability is felt most acutely by the department’s early- and mid-career investigators, who are in the critical phase of establishing laboratories and securing their first independent grants. The timing of the funding shake-up could not have been more challenging for Kaveri A. Thakoor, PhD, Assistant Professor of Ophthalmic Science (in Ophthalmology) and Director of the Artificial Intelligence for Vision Science Laboratory. Her team is building artificial-intelligence tools to detect and predict retinal disease progression, an area advancing at a rapid pace. “When federal funding stalls, it isn’t only about dollars—it’s about timing,” she says. “AI and data-science projects move quickly, and every month lost can mean falling behind in a field that’s advancing daily.”

Like her colleagues, Dr. Thakoor has sought to bridge the gap through other avenues, including foundation grants and career-development awards. “Support from organizations such as Research to Prevent Blindness has been essential,” she says. “But beyond any one grant, what keeps us going is the



Xin Zhang, PhD



Janet R. Sparrow, PhD

belief that discovery in vision science changes lives. That’s what motivates my team to persist through the uncertainty.”

Dr. Thakoor’s experience reflects a challenge shared across generations of scientists: sustaining discovery when the foundations of research become unstable. For senior investigators such as Simon John, PhD, Robert L. Burch III Professor of Ophthalmic Science (in Ophthalmology), whose pioneering work on glaucoma genetics has shaped the field for decades, the stakes are even higher.

“When resources are uncertain, it’s not just experiments that are at risk. It’s the infrastructure that supports them,” he says. “You lose experienced staff, students reconsider research careers, and years of investment in animal models or specialized technology can be lost.”

The instability also threatens the pipeline of young clinician-scientists and the future of the field, agrees Dr. Balasubramanian. “We’re not just managing experiments; we’re managing people’s futures,” she says. “Postdocs and students plan their careers around the timing of grants. When that predictability disappears, it becomes difficult to offer them the stability they need to stay in research.”



Research laboratories in the Hammer Health Sciences Building advance discovery across vision science.



She has encouraged her team to focus on what they can control. “We’re keeping our projects moving with smaller, internally supported studies,” she says. “It’s not ideal, but it helps maintain progress and gives trainees the experience they need to stay competitive when funding cycles restart.”

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Clinical Faculty Roundup

The Department of Ophthalmology has welcomed several exceptional new members to its clinical faculty this year, bringing fresh expertise and energy across subspecialties. Their arrival strengthens Columbia's leadership in patient care and extends its reach throughout New York City and Westchester.

"These new colleagues bring extraordinary skill, dedication, and compassion to their work," says G.A. (Jack) Cioffi, MD, Jean and Richard Deems Professor, Edward S. Harkness Professor, and Chair of Ophthalmology. "They represent the next generation of physician-educators, deeply committed to their patients, to education, and to advancing the field."

Portia Sirinek, MD, Assistant Clinical Ophthalmologist

When Portia Sirinek, MD, walks into the new Columbia Ophthalmology offices at NewYork-Presbyterian The One in White Plains, she says it still feels a little like a dream. "I trained here, I fell in love with ophthalmology here, and now I'm back at Columbia, practicing in this incredible new facility, helping shape the next generation," she says. "It's a full-circle moment."

A graduate of Columbia University Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons and of Columbia's ophthalmology residency program, Dr. Sirinek completed her glaucoma fellowship at Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts Eye and Ear before joining the Harvard faculty. "I always thought that there is value in training at different places, so I did want to go somewhere else for fellowship, to get a broader experience and a different perspective," she says. "Also, the pandemic had just started when I was finishing my residency, which cut short some of our surgical experience in our last year. So I was able to get a lot of cataract experience at Massachusetts Eye and Ear, as well as the full range of glaucoma surgeries. I think they're all suited to different purposes and different situations."

In 2025, Dr. Sirinek returned to Columbia to lead glaucoma and cataract care in Westchester. "It felt like coming home to family," she says.

Dr. Sirinek's mentors include some of Columbia's best-known leaders. She credits James Auran, MD, Professor of Ophthalmology, and Roslyn Stahl, MD, Assistant Clinical Professor of Ophthalmology, with instilling her surgical precision; Jason Horowitz, MD, Professor of Ophthalmology, with sharpening her clinical intuition, and Dr. Chang and current Chair G.A. (Jack) Cioffi, MD, with modeling visionary leadership. "They are all great mentors, extremely supportive and true cheerleaders in the operating room," she says.

Practicing full-time at The One, Dr. Sirinek focuses on comprehensive glaucoma management, from advanced laser trabeculectomy to minimally invasive glaucoma surgery (MIGS), trabeculectomy, and tube shunt procedures. "Glaucoma care is about relationships over the long term," she says. "You see patients for decades, guiding them through complex decisions. It's very satisfying when you can stabilize the condition of someone who has very uncontrolled glaucoma."

Away from her practice, she finds creative renewal through music. A lifelong French horn player, she performs with regional community orchestras and chamber ensembles. "Music and surgery are more similar than people realize," she says. "Both



Portia Sirinek, MD

require precision, patience, and rhythm, and most of all, listening."

Dr. Sirinek recently played a concert with a group she had last performed with prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. "I'd last seen all of them the week

before the pandemic shut everything down. We were supposed to play a concert and were debating all week whether it was safe, before we finally decided to cancel it," she says. "That was the last time I saw everyone in this group. After having said such an abrupt goodbye to everyone, it's wonderful to be back."

Daphna Mezd, MD, Associate Professor of Ophthalmology

For Daphna Mezd, MD, pediatric ophthalmology is a discipline of both precision and empathy. "When I was a resident, strabismus always felt like the toughest thing to figure out," she recalls. "But after a while, I realized I liked the challenge—especially deciding what surgery was right for each patient."

Born and raised in Israel near the Dead Sea, Dr. Mezd earned her medical degree at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. "In Israel, we have to choose our career path early," she says. "I was deciding between mathematics and medicine, but I wanted to make a real difference in people's lives and connect directly with them."

During medical school she discovered ophthalmology. "I liked that it combines surgery, precision, and immediate results," she says. "You can diagnose and treat at the same time, which is very gratifying."

She completed her residency in ophthalmology at Tel Aviv Sourasky Medical Center, where she trained under Professor Anat Loewenstein and retina specialist Professor Anna Florenstein. "Professor Loewenstein shattered many glass ceilings," Dr. Mezd says. "Her dedication to excellence in clinical, surgical, and research work was an inspiration."

After residency, she moved with her family to Brazil, where she learned Portuguese, passed the national medical examination, and joined the Department of Ophthalmology at Hospital de Clinicas de Porto Alegre as a retina fellow. "It was a different culture, a different language, and I was working with a very poor population," she says. "It was an eye-opening experience."



Daphna Mezd, MD

Dr. Mezd went on to complete a fellowship in pediatric ophthalmology and strabismus at Children's National Medical Center in Washington, DC. "That fellowship gave me profound and comprehensive training," she says. "Trying to plan surgery for strabismus makes me think, and I enjoy that. I like that I can help children when they are still young and have their whole lives ahead of them, as well as adults with double vision or the social and emotional effects of eye misalignment. We can make a great difference in people's lives."

Working with children, she adds, demands patience and intuition. "A big part of the job is figuring out how to connect with each family and each child, and finding the best approach for them. One of my favorite moments, besides giving a good treatment or performing a successful surgery, is managing to get a full eye exam from a child who a few minutes earlier was too scared even to come into the room."

Returning to Israel in 2013, Dr. Mezd rejoined Tel Aviv Sourasky Medical Center as a member of the faculty, and in 2019 succeeded her mentor Dr. Heinz Stolovitch as head of its Pediatric Ophthalmology Unit. "We were able to build a new clinic, with five rooms fully equipped with the best instruments, and grow our team to five pediatric ophthalmologists and five orthoptists," she says.

"We also launched subspecialty clinics in pediatric retina and pediatric glaucoma, strengthened collaborations with neurology, neurosurgery, and genetics, and expanded our research."

In November 2025, she joined the Columbia faculty and now practices full time at NewYork-Presbyterian The One in White Plains, where she is eager to begin a new chapter. "I look forward to getting to know my patients and working closely with my new colleagues," she says. "I'm also excited to contribute to teaching and to launch new research projects."

Outside the clinic, Dr. Mezd, a mother of three young adult sons, finds balance in nature and adventure. "As a family, we love hiking and exploring new places," she says. "Last summer, we climbed Mount Olympus in Greece. I've trekked in the Himalayas, Nepal, New Zealand, and Peru. And I started skiing at age 40," she adds, laughing. "It's meditative. You have to focus completely on each step, and for a few hours I don't think about anything else."

She is also enthusiastic about her new home in New York City. "I'm really excited about the cultural opportunities—the concerts, the ballet performances, Broadway shows, museums and exhibitions."

Christina Cherny, OD, Assistant Clinical Optometrist

When Christina Cherny, OD, meets a patient who has been struggling for years to see clearly or comfortably, she knows that the moment of success won't happen in an instant. Instead, it will come after hours of mapping, measuring, refining, and rebuilding. Many of her patients have undergone corneal transplants, suffered eye injuries, or developed severe disease that has left them unable to see comfortably with glasses or standard contact lenses.

At ColumbiaDoctors at NewYork-Presbyterian The One in White Plains, Dr. Cherny specializes in caring for patients with complex corneal and ocular surface disorders. "I work with patients who have had some sort of cornea problem—a corneal transplant, an injury, or a disease that has left them unable to see comfortably with glasses or standard contact lenses," she says.

That includes patients with severe dry eye or ocular graft-versus-host disease after bone marrow transplantation. "They often develop eye complications from it, and I'll monitor those patients with advanced ocular surface disease or dryness and do all of their medical management," she says. "But the main thing that I do is create specialty contact lenses."

Unlike the lenses most people are familiar with, Dr. Cherny designs contact lenses for each individual patient. "A lot of them are hard lenses, although some are soft. We essentially create a new surface for the eye so patients can see and feel better. For example, if someone has had a cornea transplant and can't see with glasses or regular contact lenses, we can put a hard lens on the surface of the eye that cancels out the irregularity underneath."

She also fits lenses for therapeutic and cosmetic reasons. "For patients with certain diseases of the cornea, a lot of pain, or significant dryness, we can give them contact lenses for that. We call these medically necessary contact lenses," she says. "We also do prosthetic lenses for patients with severe disfigurement of an eye, to make the eye look more normal."

Dr. Cherny earned her optometry degree from the SUNY College of Optometry and completed a residency in specialty contact lenses and cornea care at Massachusetts Eye and Ear/Harvard. At The One, she works closely with Columbia cornea specialists George J. Florakis, MD, and Gabriel Rand, MD, to co-manage



Christina Cherny, OD

patients before and after surgery. "They see a lot of very complex corneal cases," she says. "If no one else can help you, they can."

In addition to her specialty work, Dr. Cherny provides comprehensive eye care for adults and children, including diabetic and glaucoma screenings. She is also trained in myopia control—interventions that can help slow the progression of nearsightedness in children and adolescents. "We can do various things, including using contact lenses, to try to slow down the progression so that they don't become extremely myopic, which can lead to other complications later on," she says.

Originally from Germany, Dr. Cherny lived in New York City for much of her life, but she recently moved from Manhattan to Irvington with her husband and young daughter. "We found a house in Westchester, and on a whim we moved here," she says.

She was surprised to find that Westchester offers an exciting food scene, and enjoys exploring local restaurants as well as spending time on her art. "My favorite medium is actually pointillism," she says. "I use fine felt-tip pens to make pictures out of dots." The family also loves to travel together, particularly to Europe. "We have an upcoming trip planned to Germany, to see the Black Forest, which I'm very excited about," she says.

Jerry Hsu, MD, MS, Assistant Professor of Ophthalmology

When he started medical school, Jerry Hsu, MD, MS, confesses that he didn't fully understand what the field of ophthalmology was. "When I was growing up, I had always thought I was seeing an ophthalmologist to check my eyes, but I had actually been seeing an optometrist," he says. "I didn't understand the difference between the two until my second or third year of medical school."

For Dr. Hsu, the path to ophthalmology began with curiosity about the brain, and evolved into a lifelong fascination with the eye. A native of Alabama, he earned his bachelor's degree in neuroscience at Rice University and a master's in neuroscience from the University of Pennsylvania before completing his MD at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. He trained in ophthalmology at the New York Eye and Ear Infirmary of Mount Sinai and then completed a cornea and external disease fellowship at the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute in Miami.

"I originally thought I wanted to pursue neurology, because I did a lot of sensory-based neuroscience research while I was in college," he says. "But

over time, I realized that I wanted to pursue a specialty where I could not only leverage my interest in neuroscience, but also do both medicine and surgery. Ophthalmology really integrated all of my passions."

His interest in the cornea began early in residency. "Among the most common conditions we would see in our walk-in clinics were severe corneal infections or corneal ulcers, and I became really interested in those," he says. "As soon as I became involved with performing corneal surgeries and cataract surgeries, it solidified my choice of subspecialty."

Dr. Hsu divides his time between the Harkness Eye Institute in Washington Heights and the department's newly opened Robert Burch Family Eye Center at Lincoln Center, where he cares for patients with corneal infections, dystrophies, and ocular surface disease. "I'm very excited about the practice that I'm currently developing. I'm interested in offering a very comprehensive cornea practice, encompassing all aspects of the subspecialty, while at the same time building my clinical and academic research interests," he says.

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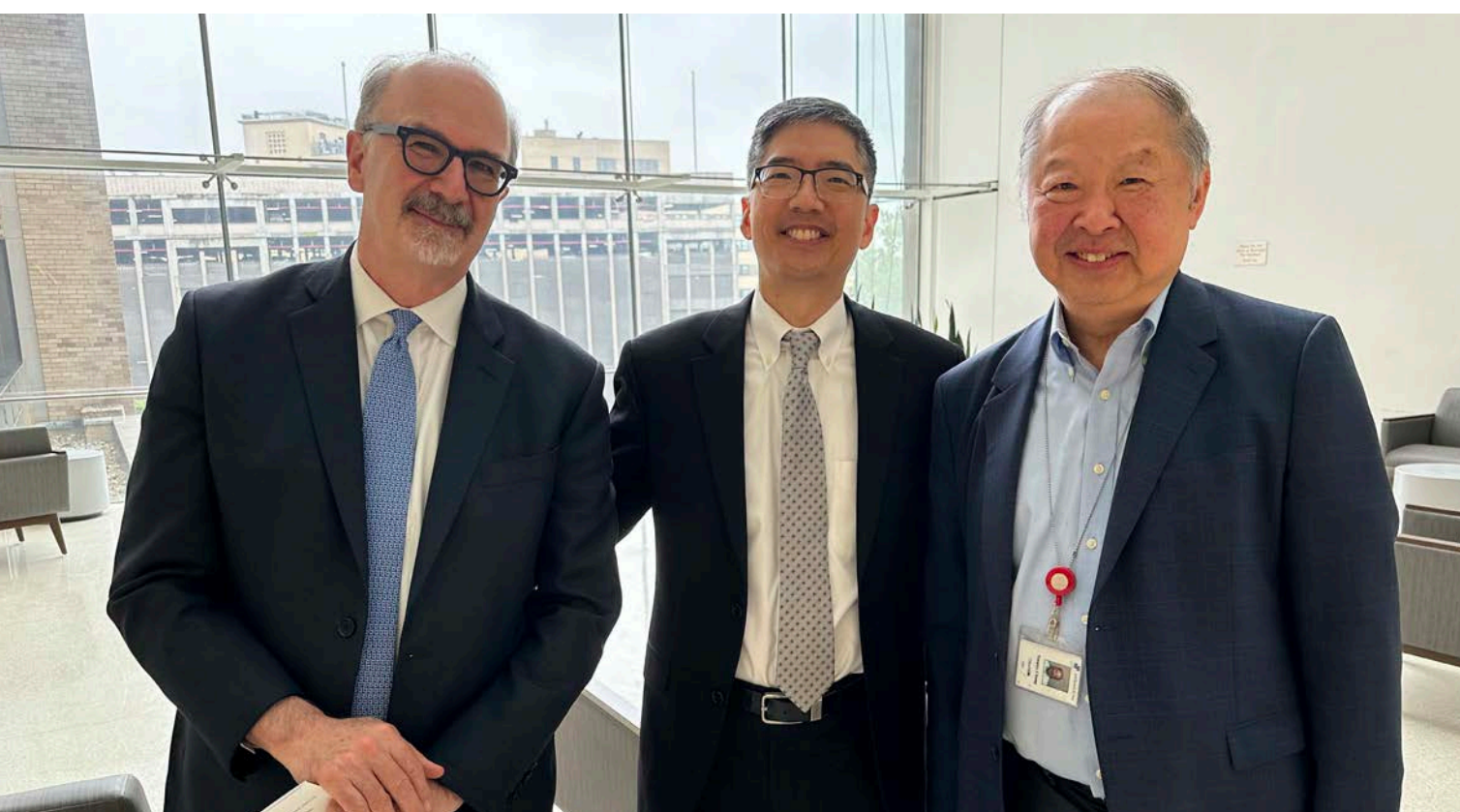
Precision Ophthalmology 2025: In Our DNA

At Columbia's fourth Precision Ophthalmology™ Conference, held June 12-14, 2025, the theme "In Our DNA" captured both the focus and the spirit of the meeting—reflecting not only the field's rapid advances in genetics and data science, but also the deep integration of discovery and innovation that defines Columbia Ophthalmology itself. The three-day event brought together scientists, clinicians, trainees, and alumni for a sweeping look at advances in artificial intelligence, regenerative biology, complex genetics, and patient-specific therapies—all reflecting the department's mission to integrate discovery, innovation, and patient-centered excellence in advancing the science and practice of vision care.

The conference opened on June 12 with Education Day, continuing Columbia's decades-long tradition of honoring John T. Flynn, MD, the first Anne S. Cohen Professor of Ophthalmology, whose legacy of teaching and mentorship shaped the careers of generations of ophthalmologists. Residents, fellows, and postdoctoral scientists presented their research and clinical cases to an audience of faculty, staff, and alumni, culminating in the John T. Flynn Memorial Lecture by Roy Wilson, MD, President Emeritus of Wayne State University and Chancellor Emeritus of the University of Colorado at Denver and Health Science Center, and the annual graduation ceremony.

This first day, designed as a celebration of the department's training mission, set the tone for the meeting's integration of education and innovation. "From our earliest learners to our most senior investigators," said Department Chair G. A. (Jack) Cioffi, MD, "the theme of Precision

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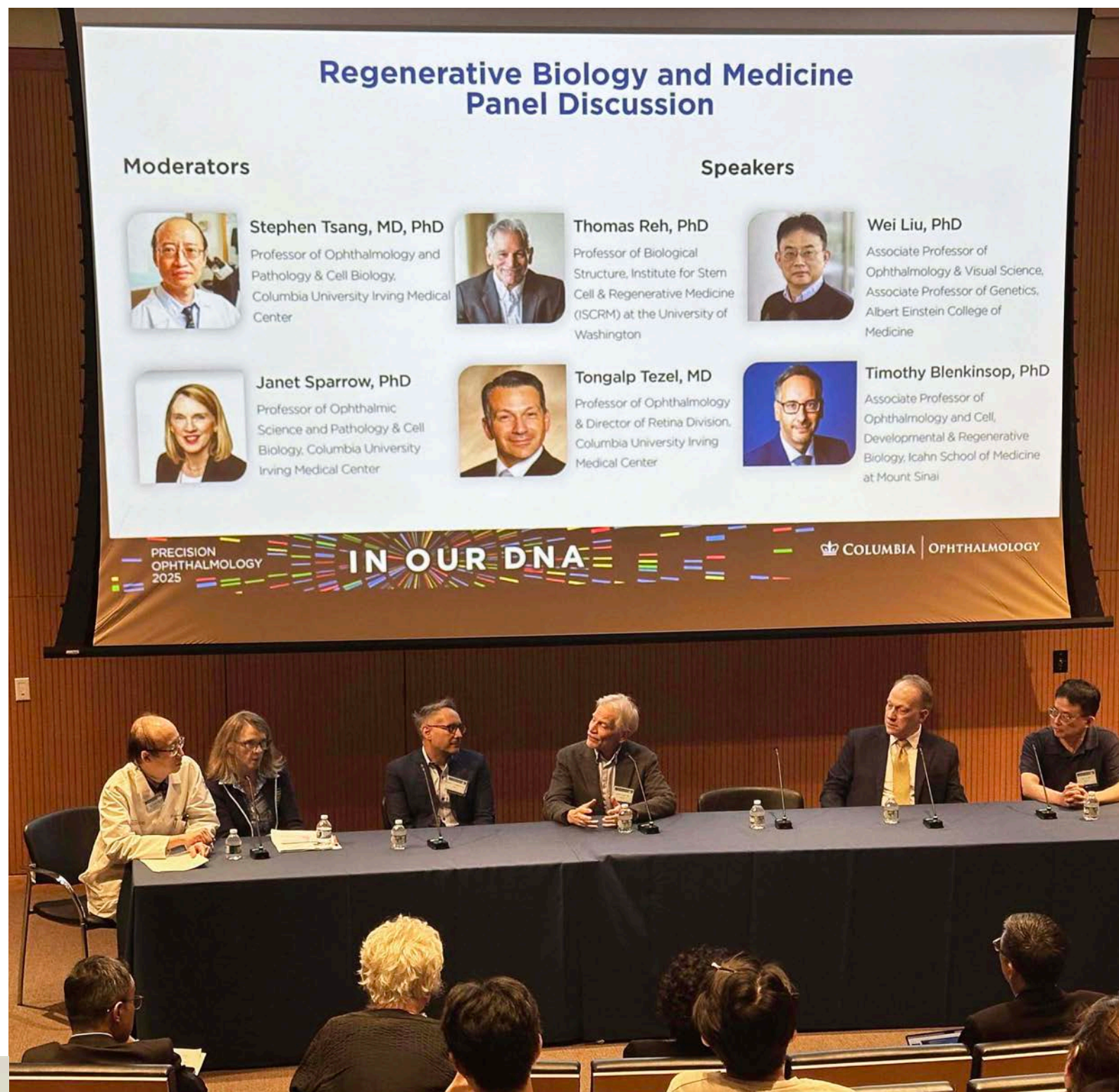
Experts discuss regenerative advances during the Regenerative Biology and Medicine panel at Precision Ophthalmology 2025.

Faculty, trainees, and researchers gather for Columbia's Precision Ophthalmology Conference.

G. A. (Jack) Cioffi, MD (left), Michael Chiang, MD (center), and Stanley Chang, MD (right) at Precision Ophthalmology 2025: In Our DNA.



G. A. (Jack) Cioffi, MD, opens Precision Ophthalmology 2025, reflecting on the Department's impact over time.



Celebrating Scientific Discovery: The Tenth Abraham Spector Prize Lecture and Symposium

On October 9, 2025, the Columbia Department of Ophthalmology and the Columbia Naomi Berrie Diabetes Center hosted the Tenth Abraham Spector Prize Lecture and Symposium, honoring the legacy of Abraham Spector, PhD, an internationally recognized leader in vision research. Dr. Spector's pioneering work earned him the Guggenheim and Fulbright Fellowships, the ARVO Proctor Medal, and numerous other honors during his distinguished career.

This year's symposium featured presentations from Rudolph L. Leibel, MD, the Christopher J. Murphy Professor of Diabetes Research; Elia J. Duh, MD, G. Edward and G. Britton Durell Professor of Ophthalmology at the Wilmer Eye Institute, Johns Hopkins University; and Richard DiMarchi, PhD, Distinguished Professor of Chemistry at Indiana University.

The highlight of the afternoon was the Abraham Spector Prize Lecture, delivered by Svetlana Mojsvo, PhD, the Lulu Chow Wang and Robin Chemers Neustein Research Associate Professor at Rockefeller University, whose discovery of glucagon-like peptide 1 (GLP-1), an incretin hormone produced by gut tissue that plays a key role in insulin secretion and glucose metabolism, has been translated into breakthrough treatments for diabetes and weight loss. Her talk, "Chemistry Matters: From a Putative Peptide to Effective Medicines for Diabetes and Obesity," traced the scientific journey behind one of the most transformative medical advances of the past generation.

"The story Dr. Mojsvo shared is remarkable," says Xin Zhang, PhD, Malcolm P. Aldrich Research Professor of Ophthalmic Science and Professor of Pathology & Cell Biology, and Vision Science Research Director. "She began with what seemed like a very simple finding, identifying a peptide, and that became the foundation for a therapy now changing the lives of millions. With the contributions of many collaborators, including chemists and pharmacologists, that early discovery evolved into a medication that can consistently reduce body weight and improve metabolic health at levels never seen before."

The symposium also highlighted emerging research connecting metabolic pathways and eye disease, Dr. Zhang notes. "One of the most exciting presentations came from Dr. Elia Duh of Johns Hopkins, who showed how GLP-1 may also influence immune cells involved in diabetic retinopathy," he says. "It is fascinating to see how discoveries in one field can ripple outward and transform others, including ophthalmology. We all came away deeply inspired. The symposium was a vivid reminder of how deep biological understanding, starting from a single molecule, can ultimately make a profound difference in human health."



Richard DiMarchi, PhD (left), Svetlana Mojsvo, PhD, Elia J. Duh, MD, and Rudolph L. Leibel, MD, speakers at the Tenth Abraham Spector Prize Lecture and Symposium.



Kaveri A. Thakoor, PhD

Grants and Awards

The Department of Ophthalmology is proud to recognize four outstanding investigators whose recent honors reflect both Columbia's research excellence and the innovation shaping the future of vision science.

Advancing Artificial Intelligence and Vision Science

Kaveri A. Thakoor, PhD, Assistant Professor of Ophthalmic Science (in Ophthalmology) and director of the Artificial Intelligence for Vision Science Laboratory, has been honored with the RPB/Tom Wertheimer Career Development Award in Data Science, a four-year grant supporting early-career vision scientists whose work leverages big data and AI to improve disease detection and treatment.

Dr. Thakoor's laboratory develops advanced machine learning tools to enhance accessibility and accuracy in eye disease detection, focusing on low-cost, portable imaging devices. "This award will enable us to move from proof of concept to real-world implementation," she says. "Our goal is to bring high-quality imaging and AI-driven diagnosis to the communities that need it most."

The Columbia environment makes this vision possible, she adds. "AI shouldn't be something that only benefits patients in high-resource settings. The idea is to make eye care accessible, using technology that can travel where the specialists can't. Working at Columbia allows me to collaborate across engineering, medicine, and data science, which is exactly what is needed to make accessible eye care happen."

Unlocking New Insights in Glaucoma Research

Revathi Balasubramanian, PhD, Assistant Professor of Ophthalmology, has also received the RPB Career Development Award, along with grants from both the Glaucoma Foundation and the Glaucoma Research Foundation. Her research focuses on the development and biology of ocular drainage structures, especially as they relate to intraocular pressure and glaucoma risk.

She credits her earlier designation as a Chang-Burch Family Scholar with laying the groundwork for these recent achievements. "That early support gave me space to build my team and generate the pilot data that helped make these larger awards possible," she says.

Dr. Balasubramanian describes her work as residing "at the crossroads of developmental biology and neurodegeneration." "We're looking at glaucoma not just as an eye disease, but as a neurodegenerative process that could teach us about the brain as a whole," she explains. "These grants give us freedom to explore questions that might not fit into traditional funding structures, and to bring students into the lab so they can see discovery in action."

Since its founding in 1960, Research to Prevent Blindness (RPB) has channeled more than \$429 million into vision research and played a key role in nearly every major breakthrough in ophthalmology. Its Career Development Awards help early-career scientists become independent investigators, enabling transformative work in a field where traditional procedural funding models often fall short.

Supporting the Next Generation of Vision Scientists

Abdul Hannan, PhD, an Associate Research Scientist in Dr. Balasubramanian's lab, has received the 2025 Career Starter Grant from the Knights Templar Eye Foundation for his project "Models and Mechanisms of Pediatric Glaucoma." This award supports early-stage researchers pursuing innovative approaches to childhood vision loss.

Recognizing Leadership and Service in Ophthalmology

Aakriti Garg Shukla, MD, MSc, the Leonard A. Lauder Associate Professor of Ophthalmology has been honored with the 2025 Achievement Award from the American Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO). The Achievement Award recognizes individuals for outstanding service to the Academy, its scientific and educational programs, and to the profession of ophthalmology.

Dr. Shukla's work centers on improving the diagnosis and management of complex glaucomas and on mentoring early-career ophthalmologists through national and international organizations. She has served in multiple leadership and educational roles within the AAO, the American Glaucoma Society, and The Glaucoma Foundation.



Revathi Balasubramanian, PhD



Abdul Hannan, PhD



Aakriti Garg Shukla, MD, MSc

Clinical Faculty Roundup

Continued from page 7

His research focuses on infectious and inflammatory diseases of the cornea, and he has published papers on microbial keratitis and ocular toxicities related to systemic cancer therapies. "We're now able to use imaging and molecular diagnostics to personalize corneal treatment," he says. "Columbia's environment is ideal for that kind of interdisciplinary innovation."

Outside of medicine, Dr. Hsu brings the same attention to detail to his creative pursuits. A longtime photographer and avid restaurant explorer, he has spent more than a decade chronicling his finds as "Yelp Elite" reviewer. "Food and photography both make you stop and notice subtleties," he says.

Scott Forman, MD, Associate Clinical Ophthalmologist

Scott Forman, MD, was first drawn to neuro-ophthalmology because he didn't understand it. As a medical student at Rutgers, he attended a lecture on eye movement pathways. "I had studied neuroanatomy already, not only in medical school, but while getting a graduate degree in neurobiology," he says. "So I knew neuroanatomy better than most medical students, but I still had trouble understanding what they were talking about. That posed a challenge to me, and I knew I wanted to know more about the subspecialty."

That curiosity led him to set up a fourth-year elective at the legendary Wills Eye Hospital in Philadelphia, where he met Norman Schatz, MD, the first neurologist to be trained in neuro-ophthalmology. "He was a brilliant and dynamic physician," Dr. Forman recalls. When Dr. Forman expressed interest in joining his practice, Dr. Schatz responded with characteristic candor, telling him he was still too early in his training — a moment that left a lasting impression.



Scott Forman, MD

Despite that inauspicious beginning, his time with Dr. Schatz became transformative. "It was the best month I spent in medical school, because I saw so many fascinating patients," he says. "Whenever I struggled with a diagnosis, he always found something that I didn't see."

Dr. Forman completed his ophthalmology residency at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center, where he was fortunate to train with Jeffrey Odel, MD. When choosing between fellowship offers, he accepted the position with Dr. Odel and the late Myles Behrens, MD, retired Professor of Ophthalmology and Chief of the Neuro-Ophthalmology Division, despite having virtually no salary. "I received just about a hundred dollars a month, and I still chose Columbia over another program that offered compensation," he says. "Nobody is as brilliant as Jeff. There's no one like him in the field. Academically, it was the best year of my life."

For thirty years, Dr. Forman served as the neuro-ophthalmologist at New York Medical College, leading the inpatient consultation service and teaching residents from neurosurgery, ophthalmology, neurology, and pediatrics. He then practiced for six years in Westchester before deciding to retire and move to Taos, New Mexico, where he married his current wife, Kristina King.

The move made professional sense as well. Tom Carlow, who had founded the North American Neuro-Ophthalmology Society (NANOS), had recently passed away, and the state of New Mexico had only one neuro-ophthalmologist based at the University of New Mexico, who was just a few years out of fellowship. "I set up practice in Taos and worked there for two years before my two daughters convinced me to return east," he says. With three grandchildren growing up quickly, he moved to Northampton, Massachusetts; he now divides his time between Massachusetts and New York.

Dr. Forman joins Columbia at an exciting time, as the department expands into Westchester. He will practice two days a week at NewYork-Presbyterian The One in White Plains, working in a state-of-the-art facility with twelve examining rooms, a new photon CT scanner, and on-site MRI and PET scanners. "There will be a total of 80 physicians in specialties including neurology, pediatrics, ophthalmology, internal medicine, and other surgical specialties," he says. "It's very exciting."

Outside medicine, Dr. Forman pursues his lifelong passion for music. He began playing cello in fourth grade but switched to guitar in high school after a friend sold him a 1957 Les Paul Special. "That instrument changed everything for me," he says, laughing. Today he studies jazz guitar and lives next door to Smith College, home to the annual gypsy jazz festival Django in June. "Some of the world's best guitarists perform there every year," he says. "It's a phenomenal experience."

Rupin N. Parikh, MD, Assistant Professor of Ophthalmology

It is clear that medicine is in Rupin Parikh, MD's DNA. The youngest of three siblings from Livingston, New Jersey, his parents are both physicians—his father an internist and his mother a psychiatrist—while his oldest sister is a dermatologist and the other is an anesthesiologist. "Medicine is a big part of my family," he says, but he sees it as less an obligation than an inspiration. "We saw what a gift it was to be in that very privileged position to take care of someone's health. It was very humbling, and always something we aspired to."

After graduating from Northwestern University and Albany Medical College, Dr. Parikh faced a pivotal setback: he didn't match into ophthalmology residency on his first attempt. "It was pretty devastating," he admits. "This was obviously a dream of mine." But rather than give up, he took the feedback he received from program directors, and used his transitional year at Columbia-Bassett Medical Center in Cooperstown, NY, and a clinical ophthalmic pathology fellowship at Johns Hopkins to strengthen his foundation. The following year, he successfully matched at the University of Oklahoma.

It was during those early years that oculoplastics captured his attention. "When you look at a human being interaction, you're looking at that brow to nasal bridge area for at least 95% of the conversation," he says. "That's how you get your first impression of someone. That's how you maintain conversation. Those emotions that come through the eyes and the eyelids are so important. And it can be devastating for someone's vision if their eyelid function isn't working well. If they have ptosis that covers their vision, or if their eyelids don't close and they develop corneal disease from exposure, they can even lose the eye. That's why oculoplastics is so meaningful to me; it has both aesthetic and vision-saving dimensions."

Dr. Parikh was also attracted to the field by its remarkable range. "There is so much variety in oculoplastics," he says. "We deal with facial tumors, with lacrimal system issues, and so many other conditions within this one subspecialty. At the same time, it's very specific. I love the idea of becoming a master of one group of pathologies."



Rupin N. Parikh, MD

After completing an oculoplastics fellowship at the University of Iowa, where he won both the Departmental Fellow of the Year Award and the University-Wide Excellence in Teaching Award, Dr. Parikh knew he wanted to return home. "I wanted to be near my extended family, especially now that I have four baby nieces and they are growing up so fast."

Columbia was the obvious choice. "I wanted to be where the top ophthalmologists were," he says. "Hands down, that's Columbia."

Dr. Parikh divides his time across multiple locations, including the Robert Burch Family Eye Center at Lincoln Center, Harlem Hospital, and other sites. His primary focus is in the clinic, but he is also passionate about teaching the next generation. "I love seeing growth among trainees, and I still reflect fondly on the mentors, fellows, and residents who took time to help me develop and grow," he says. "That experience drives my love for teaching. Working closely with residents at Harlem Hospital and seeing their upward trajectory is going to be very exciting. I'm hoping to inspire some of them to go into oculoplastics. If part of my legacy here is that I've helped others see its value and become passionate about it, I'll be very proud of that."

Outside the clinic, Dr. Parikh is a self-proclaimed movie buff, video gamer, and devoted Yankees fan. Living on the Upper West Side makes it easy for him to visit family in New Jersey and to enjoy what New York has to offer. "I like doing spontaneous things like going out to comedy shows, live Q&As, and concerts," he says. "But what's most important is spending time with my family."

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A New Landmark for Vision Care: The Robert Burch Family Eye Center Opens at Lincoln Center

Continued from page 1

former Edward S. Harkness Professor and Chairman of the Department of Ophthalmology, who restored Mr. Burch's sight more than a decade ago.

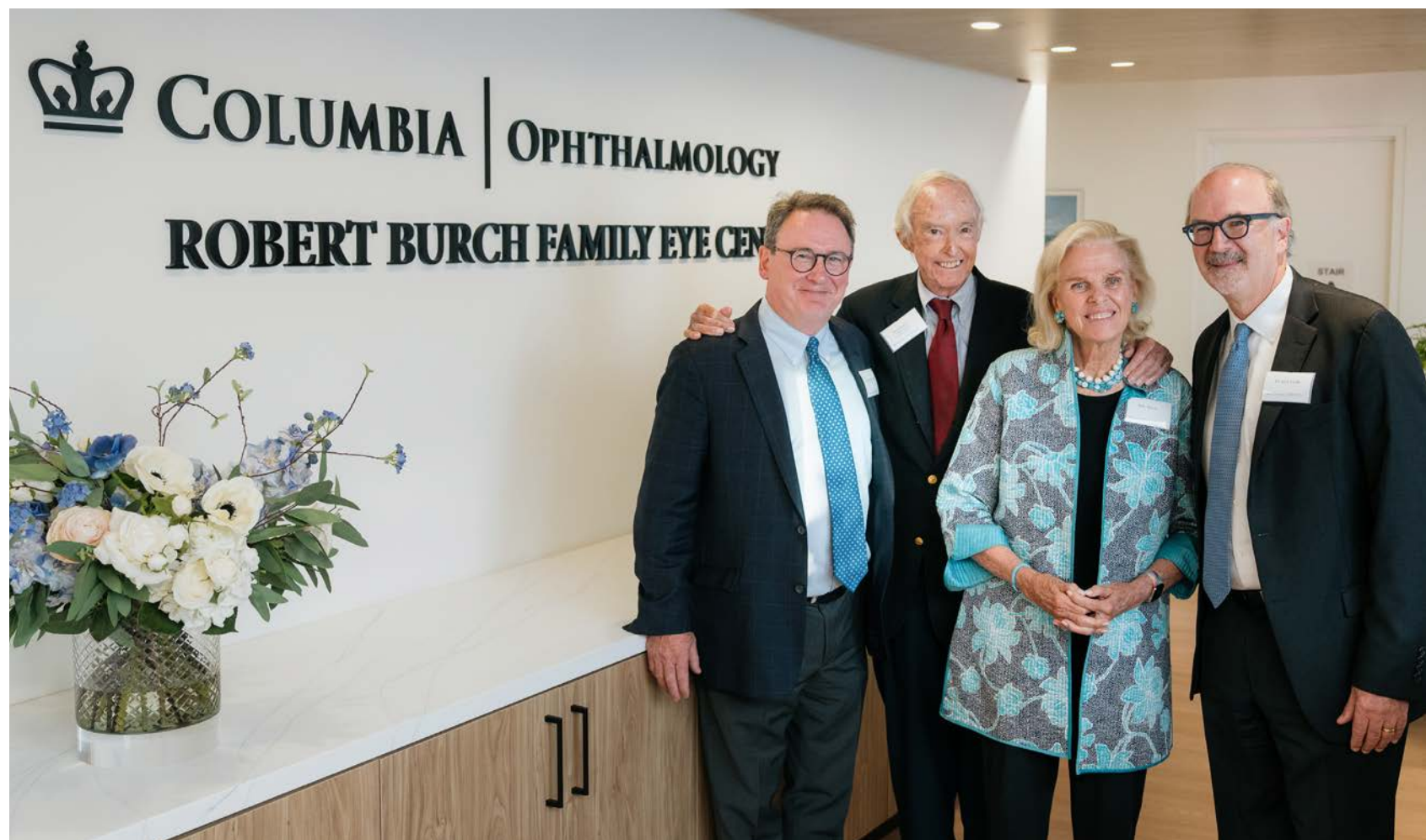
"This department has always been one of the crown jewels of Columbia," said James M. McKiernan, MD, Senior Vice Dean for Clinical Affairs at Columbia University Irving Medical Center and CEO of ColumbiaDoctors, welcoming guests to the event. "Now, with this spectacular space, the facilities truly match the exceptional talent of its physicians."

G.A. (Jack) Cioffi, MD, Jean and Richard Deems Professor, Edward S. Harkness Professor, and Chairman of the Department of Ophthalmology, described the new Eye Center as both the department's flagship and its blueprint for the future. The project was shaped by a deeply collaborative process among faculty, staff, and designers from Gensler, he noted. "Every square inch of this space was thoughtfully planned. The technology is second to none, and patients tell me every day what a joy it is to be here. A state-of-the-art space, the best technology, and the best doctors—that's a great combination."

Guests saw that combination in detail as they toured the new facility, from the serene design and efficient patient flow to the integration of advanced diagnostic technology and collaborative spaces for clinician-scientists. What began as a meticulous plan has become, in Dr. Cioffi's words, "A national and international blueprint for how you build out a clinical ophthalmology space."

In the new Center, he said, the Burches' generosity is visible in every detail, from the patient reception area named for Louis V. Gerstner, Jr., to the work of project manager Jerry (Lingshui) Wong, who collaborated closely with the Burches to refine finishes, colors, and furnishings.

Also recognized were Patrick Burke III, Vice President of Facilities Management, Operations and Planning and the CUIMC Facilities team; Columbia faculty leaders Jeffrey Liebmman, MD, Shirlee and Bernard Brown Professor of Ophthalmology, Vice Chair of the Department of Ophthalmology and Director of the



James McKiernan, MD (left), Robert Burch III and Dale Burch (center), and G.A. (Jack) Cioffi, MD (right).

Glaucoma Service, and Lisa Park, MD, Associate Professor of Ophthalmology and Director of the Division of Comprehensive Ophthalmology and Eye Care, who helped shape the facility from concept to completion; operations staff Daniel Trese and Bonnie Wang; and Jane Heffner, whose stewardship of the development program connected the Department and its donors throughout the process.

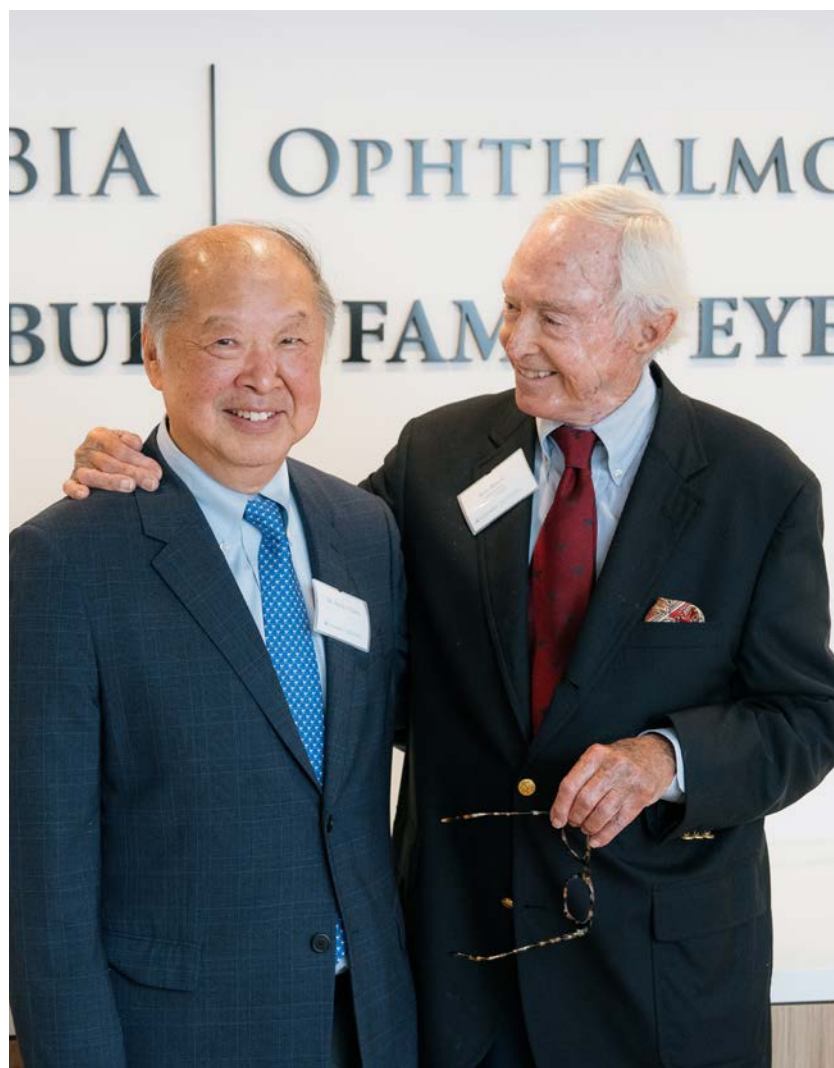
The Burch family's philanthropy has transformed ophthalmology and medicine at Columbia for more than a decade. In addition to endowing the Robert L. Burch III

Professorship, they have established the Chang-Burch Scholars Program to nurture early-career physician-scientists and have advanced major initiatives in aging and longevity research.

Their support has pushed science, education, and medicine forward, Dr. Cioffi said. "Bob's philanthropy has touched every part of our mission: clinical care, research, and education. He's helped us recruit leaders, build new programs, and train the next generation of ophthalmologists. He and Dale have not just given generously; they've given with vision."

As he looked out at the ten members of the extended Burch family in attendance, Dr. Cioffi recalled a moment from the opening of the first Robert Burch Family Eye Center, at the Lighthouse Guild in 2014. "Robby Burch was just a little boy then," he said. "He sat up on the check-in desk when we cut the ribbon. Tonight, he's sixteen, and now his younger cousin is holding the scissors. That continuity says everything about this family's spirit."

The moment symbolized a living legacy: a family's enduring commitment to preserving and restoring sight, and a department continually redefining excellence in eye care. "You're pushing science forward, you're pushing education forward, you're pushing medicine forward," Dr. Cioffi told the Burch family. "We couldn't be more honored to be part of your journey, and we will be good stewards of everything you've endowed us with."



Stanley Chang, MD (left), and Robert Burch III (right).

MAKING HISTORY AT HARKNESS

This Viewpoint column will spotlight milestones in ophthalmic care that have taken place at Columbia, from the early "firsts" to the latest achievements.

The Art and Heart of Philanthropy: Honoring Jane Heffner

In 1933, when the Edward S. Harkness Eye Institute first opened its doors, it represented the vision of a philanthropist who believed that science and compassion could be partners in healing. Edward S. Harkness, one of academic medicine's most generous benefactors and founder of the Commonwealth Fund, had already transformed the landscape of medicine at Columbia through his gifts for the medical center. But the Eye Institute was something deeply personal: a place where vision itself would be studied, protected, and restored. His belief in the power of philanthropy to advance medicine was so enduring that, nearly a century later, the spirit of his generosity still guides everything that happens here.

For the past 22 years, no one has embodied that spirit more fully than Jane Heffner, Executive Director of Development for the Department of Ophthalmology, who retired at the end of December 2025. As the Department's first full-time development director, Jane has been both architect and ambassador of its modern philanthropic identity, helping donors connect their passion for vision science and patient care with the Department's ambitious mission.

When Stanley Chang, MD, the K.K. Tse and Ku Teh Ying Professor of Ophthalmology and the former Edward S. Harkness Professor and Chairman of the Department of Ophthalmology, first met Ms. Heffner, it was not across a desk but in an exam room. "I actually met Jane as a patient first," he recalls. "We talked about her career. She had worked for Salomon Brothers and in development at two museums, and she seemed to know a lot of people in New York."

Dr. Chang had previously relied on part-time help to manage the department's philanthropic efforts and relationships with donors and alumni, but had recently begun efforts to find a full-time director of development. He immediately recognized in Ms. Heffner the experience, connections, and personal qualities required to make the position a success.

Over the next two decades, Ms. Heffner helped steward transformative gifts that elevated the Department's standing as a national leader in ophthalmology: supporting endowed professorships; advancing basic, clinical, and translational research; building major clinical and research facilities; and strengthening education and training for future leaders in the field. Working closely with faculty, donors, and the Board of Advisors, she forged enduring partnerships that have enabled the Department to pursue bold scientific discovery and innovation in vision care. Her work has helped ensure that Columbia Ophthalmology's century-long legacy of excellence, rooted in Edward S. Harkness's original vision, continues to thrive for generations to come.

Ms. Heffner's success has come from her genuine warmth, Dr. Chang says. "She became friends with many of the donors. She got to know them and really demonstrated an interest in them as people. She's caring, well-organized, and doesn't let things sit around. And she has always transmitted her excitement about our new projects in research, education, and clinical care to the donors."

For Alan R. Morse, JD, PhD, Adjunct Professor of Ophthalmology, a member of the Department's Board of Advisors and President Emeritus of Lighthouse Guild, Ms. Heffner has been the bedrock

of the development program. "I don't think anything you can say that's laudatory about Jane is overstated. I think the world of her. I've worked with a lot of development people, and she's better than anybody I've ever worked with. From the outset, she was always easy to talk to and always concerned and committed to the departmental mission. She is focused and conscientious, with meticulous attention to detail."

He also admires her candor and humor. "If something is wrong, she'll tell you immediately," he says. "If something was right, she'd be equally free to say, 'Great job.' She really gets it. She understands the department, the mission, and the donors, and goes out of her way to learn what their needs and desires are."

Jean Sheng, whose generosity recently established the Jean Sheng Associate Professorship of Ophthalmology, echoes that sentiment. "I've known Jane for over ten years," Sheng said. "Her professional demeanor, her always cheerful disposition—even during stressful situations when managing complicated business events—and her attention to detail contribute to her reputation.



Jane Heffner



Stanley Chang, MD (left), and Jane Heffner (right).

Jane Heffner (right), with longtime donors Dr. Alan Morse and Mrs. Morse.



Jane has always been a delight to work with. One couldn't ask for a better person to help promote and execute the Department of Ophthalmology's goals. She will be sorely missed."

Ms. Heffner's colleagues agree. In an era when philanthropy can feel impersonal, she has made it deeply human. She sees each

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A Life of Vision and Gratitude: The Story of Danny H.-Kauffmann Jokl, MD

Continued from page 1

He advised Sixth Fleet Command to disregard the regulation and order that every sailor on the affected ship be treated immediately. “It was a risk,” Dr. Jokl says. “But the Admiral trusted me, and no one else became ill.” His decisive action earned him a formal commendation, and more importantly, a lasting conviction. “That experience taught me that leadership means using judgment and courage to act when it matters most.”

After his military service, Dr. Jokl completed a residency in ophthalmology at McGill University and a fellowship in Boston, where he became fascinated by the emerging field of vitreoretinal surgery. He was among the first to recognize the promise of vitrectomy—a technique pioneered by Robert Machemer, MD—and



G.A. (Jack) Cioffi, MD and Danny H.-Kauffmann Jokl, MD

helped establish one of the earliest vitrectomy units in New York. In 1978, just two years out of training, he organized the first international symposium on vitrectomy in New York City, bringing together ophthalmologists from around the world.

“I was always interested in innovation,” he says. “And I was lucky to have mentors who enabled creativity. That’s the phrase I like best. Pioneers like Dr. Harvey Lincoff, the founder of modern retinal detachment surgery, Dr. Michael Dunn, who invited me to set up a retina unit at Westchester Medical Center, and Dr. Stanley Chang, whose visionary leadership transformed the Department of Ophthalmology, encouraged new ideas and gave me the freedom to take an idea and run with it.”

That openness to innovation, and the mentorship that made it possible, became central to his own philosophy as a physician. When he joined the Columbia faculty in 1998, invited by then-chair Dr. Chang, he found a department that shared that spirit. “Columbia was exciting,” he says. “People were approachable, and new ideas were welcomed.” He collaborated with Ron Silverman, PhD, and Stephen Tsang, MD, PhD, on research exploring retinal vascular flow and the genetic basis of eye disease, while continuing to mentor young ophthalmologists.

Yet throughout his long and distinguished career in retina, one field remained close to his heart: neuro-ophthalmology. “As a medical student, I studied under Dr. David Cogan at Mass Eye and Ear, who was a pioneer in the field. I loved the intellectual challenge. These were patients who didn’t fit neatly into categories, where careful observation and reasoning made all the difference,” he says. “Neuro-ophthalmology connects the eye and the brain.”

A few years ago, when Dr. Jokl met with Dr. Chang, now the K.K. Tse and Ku Teh Ying Professor of Ophthalmology, and G.A. (Jack) Cioffi, MD, Jean and Richard Deems Professor, Edward S. Harkness Professor, and Chairman of the Department of Ophthalmology, to discuss creating new endowments to strengthen subspecialty training at Columbia, he immediately knew where his philanthropy would go.

“Both Dr. Chang and Dr. Cioffi suggested neuro-ophthalmology and retina, and I’m not sure they realized at the time how perfect that was,” he says. “It solved the problem I’d been struggling with: how to pay back the country that had given me so much.”

His endowment of the Danny H.-Kauffmann Jokl, MD, Fellowship in Neuro-Ophthalmology, provides essential training support for

young physicians entering the field, while his most recent act of generosity, the Danny H.-Kauffmann-Jokl, MD, Professorship of Neuro-Ophthalmology, ensures its continued vitality at Columbia for generations to come.

The additional hyphen in the professorship’s title is not an accident of punctuation but carries a deep personal meaning. “Kauffmann was my father’s name, and Jokl was my mother’s,” he says. “I added that extra hyphen because women should get credit, too. The fellowships were me giving back to medicine; the professorship gives back to my family.”

For Jeffrey Odel, MD, Columbia’s inaugural Danny H.-Kauffmann-Jokl, MD, Professor of Neuro-Ophthalmology, these gifts reflect not only generosity but also integrity of purpose. “Danny has always been academically curious,” Dr. Odel says. “He’s been interested in neuro-ophthalmology for more than 20 years, always approaching me at conferences to ask questions and always encouraging me to keep building the field. These endowments come straight from his heart.”

Dr. Odel adds that philanthropy like Dr. Jokl’s is essential for a discipline that doesn’t generate large revenues but is critical to patient care. “Neuro-ophthalmology is the interface between the eye and the brain,” he says. “We diagnose, we triage, we think deeply. It’s a field for people who love solving puzzles, and that’s exactly the kind of person Dr. Jokl is. His support allows us to train fellows and maintain the level of academic inquiry that defines Columbia.”

Dr. Jokl shares that vision for the field’s future. “Neuro-ophthalmology, which bridges the eye and the brain, will lead the next great advances, especially as we combine genetics and artificial intelligence. We’re at the beginning of a new era.”

As he reflects on his journey from a child refugee in wartime Europe to a Navy officer, ophthalmology innovator, and philanthropist, Dr. Jokl returns to the themes that have shaped his life: gratitude, creativity, and courage.

“Everything has come full circle,” he says. “This country and Columbia gave me opportunities I could never have dreamed of. Now I hope what I’ve done will enable others to explore, to innovate, and to give back in their own way. Enabling creativity is what leadership is about, in medicine and in life. I was lucky enough to have people who enabled mine. Now it’s my turn to make sure others have the same chance.”

The Art and Heart of Philanthropy: Honoring Jane Heffner

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relationship as a partnership grounded in respect and mutual purpose. Her imprint is visible not only in the endowed chairs, research initiatives, and new facilities that have flourished under her guidance, but in the trust she has cultivated among faculty, alumni, and friends. As Dr. Chang puts it, she helped turn the department’s aspirations into reality. “She was really essential,” he says simply.

When G.A. (Jack) Cioffi, MD, Jean and Richard Deems Professor, Edward S. Harkness Professor, and Chairman of the Department of Ophthalmology, arrived in 2012, he stipulated in his contract that there would be a full-time director of philanthropy in the Department. “I had already been a Chair of a department, and I realized the importance of a professional to guide our philanthropy,” says Dr. Cioffi. “And the first time that I met with Jane Heffner, I knew she was a perfect partner for me. Jane is professional, insightful, intelligent, and mission-driven.”

As she prepares to retire, Ms. Heffner’s colleagues and friends find themselves reflecting on what she has given back to the place that became her professional home. Through two decades of leadership, she helped ensure that the generosity that built the Edward S. Harkness Eye Institute would continue to thrive in a new century.

In that sense, Jane Heffner has done more than honor the legacy of Edward Harkness; she has extended it. Just as Harkness saw the potential of a future shaped by philanthropy, she saw the people who could make that future real. And like the donor whose name graces the Eye Institute’s marble façade, she leaves behind not just a record of giving, but a legacy of vision. Dr. Cioffi summarized Ms. Heffner’s contributions by noting, “She always does things for the right reasons and has expertly combined the intent of the donors with needs of the Department. She is second to none, and I will miss her sorely.”



Researchers present advances in genetics, artificial intelligence, and precision vision care.

Precision Ophthalmology 2025: In Our DNA

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Ophthalmology: In Our DNA captures who we are as a department—committed to mentorship, collaboration, and discovery that advances patient care.”

The second day of the conference focused on the clinical application of emerging science. Faculty, alumni, and outside experts shared new diagnostic and surgical techniques and perioperative strategies, demonstrating how molecular insights and computational tools are already reshaping the practice of ophthalmology. Sessions emphasized the translation of laboratory discoveries into surgical and medical advances that improve outcomes for patients worldwide.

The conference’s culminating day, “Precision Ophthalmology 2025: In Our DNA,” drew national and international experts for a full day of scientific presentations moderated by Columbia faculty including Aliaa Abdelhakim, MD, PhD, Assistant Professor of Ophthalmology; Stephen H. Tsang, MD, PhD, László Z. Bitó Professor of Ophthalmology and Professor of Pathology & Cell Biology; Irene Maumenee, MD, Professor of Ophthalmology and Director of Clinical Ophthalmic Genetics; Simon John, PhD, Robert L. Burch III Professor of Ophthalmology Science (in Ophthalmology); and Vision Science Research Director Xin Zhang, PhD, Malcolm P. Aldrich Research Professor of Ophthalmic Science and Professor of Pathology & Cell Biology.

Opening the day, National Eye Institute Director Michael Chiang, MD, returned to his academic home to deliver the Ulrich Ollendorff, MD Lecture, “Data Science, AI, and the Future of Ophthalmology.” Dr. Chiang described how ophthalmology’s wealth of image-based data makes it a natural driver of artificial intelligence and computational medicine. “The fact that ophthalmology produces more image data linked to clinical data than almost any other field makes it uniquely positioned to lead the AI movement,” he said. “What excites me most is how the eye can serve as a true window to the body, predicting systemic and neurologic disease years before it appears clinically.”

He highlighted two NIH initiatives shaping the field’s future: Bridge to AI, a \$130 million project to generate multimodal data-

sets for hypothesis discovery, and Primed AI, a new \$121 million program to develop imaging and machine-learning tools for precision medicine. Both, he noted, aim to strengthen data integration and team science across institutions.

Dr. Chiang’s focus on collaboration and standardized data set the tone for a day that spanned the frontiers of vision science. It featured keynote lectures by leaders in the field: Cecilia Lee, MD, MS, Professor of Ophthalmology and Vision Science at the University of Washington, discussing artificial intelligence in precision medicine; Tom Reh, PhD, Professor of Biological Structure at the University of Washington, on retinal regeneration; Janey Wiggs, MD, PhD, Paul Austin Chandler Professor of Ophthalmology and Vice Chair of Clinical Research at Harvard, on glaucoma polygenic risk scores; and Columbia’s own Andrea Califano, PhD, the Clyde and Helen Wu Professor of Chemical and Systems Biology, whose talk on patient-specific cancer therapies exemplified the promise of individualized medicine.

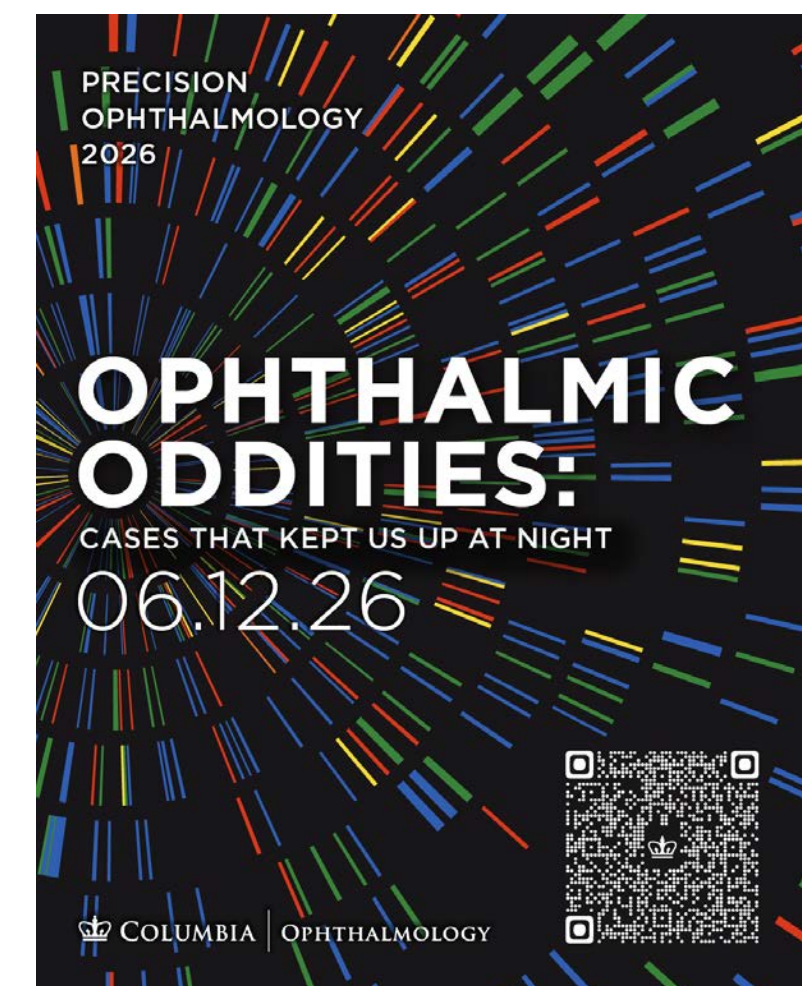
Between these headlining lectures, Columbia faculty presented new research on genetic, cellular, and computational breakthroughs. Topics included the hemoglobin connection in retinal regeneration and age-related macular degeneration, presented by Tongalp Tezel, MD, the Chang Family Professor of Ophthalmology and Director of the Vitreoretinal Service; and breakthroughs in decoding inherited retinal disease, described by Winston Lee, PhD, a clinical research scientist in the laboratory of Rando Allikmets, PhD, William and Donna Acquavella Professor of Ophthalmic Science (in Ophthalmology) and Pathology & Cell Biology.

“The concept of precision ophthalmology truly captures the breadth of what we do here,” said Jeffrey Liebmann, MD, Shirlee and Bernard

Brown Professor of Ophthalmology, Vice Chair of the Department of Ophthalmology and Director of the Glaucoma Service. “It spans big-data analysis, artificial intelligence, and genetics—but it also refers to the precision of ophthalmology itself: our diagnostic and surgical exactitude.”

The convergence of artificial intelligence and vision research represents a transformational moment, said Dr. Zhang, who co-moderated the AI session. “We can see how AI is revolutionizing every aspect of medicine, from image analysis to genomics to therapy,” he said. “What’s particularly exciting is that the eye gives us a way to study systemic disease—Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s, even cardiovascular health—through imaging and computation.”

“These precision meetings are part of our vision for where medicine and ophthalmology are headed,” said Dr. Liebmann. “Evidence-based, science-based, gene-based interventions are the future, and that future is already taking shape here at Columbia.”



IN MEMORIAM:

Louis V. Gerstner, Jr.

Louis V. Gerstner, Jr., whose visionary leadership has left a lasting legacy within the Department of Ophthalmology, passed away on December 27, 2025, at the age of 83. Most famous as the business genius who saved IBM in the 1990s, Mr. Gerstner will always be remembered at Columbia for his generous support of scientific discovery and education. After stepping back from corporate leadership at the age of 61, Mr. Gerstner devoted himself with equal intensity to philanthropy, focusing on education, health care, and scientific research. From early career funding for young scientists, to endowing the Louis V. Gerstner, Jr. Clinical Research Center, to most recently sponsoring the Louis V. Gerstner, Jr. Reception Lounge at our new Robert Burch Family Eye Center facility near Lincoln Center, Mr. Gerstner has been a steadfast partner in advancing the Department's mission.

"Through his support of young investigators and his endowment of critical facilities, he strengthened our ability to advance both patient care and scientific discovery," said G.A. (Jack) Cioffi, MD, Jean and Richard Deems Professor, Edward S. Harkness Professor, and Chairman of the Department of Ophthalmology. "His legacy will continue to be felt in every discovery and every patient we serve. We send our deepest condolences to Robin, Elizabeth, and the whole family."



Louis V. Gerstner, Jr.

Voices of the Investigators

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Ironically, these pressures come at a time of extraordinary scientific promise, Dr. John notes. "It would be tragic if we slowed momentum at the very moment when the tools to prevent blindness are finally within reach."

This a moment that calls for unity and renewed investment, Dr. Zhang agrees. "We're entering a transformative era in vision science—an era of AI, gene therapy, and regenerative medicine," he says. "But these advances depend on sustained infrastructure, including people, technology, and stable funding. Philanthropic support has been essential for bridging gaps and keeping critical projects moving forward."

The current situation is not a passing disruption, but a serious threat to the research enterprise on which progress in vision science depends, says G.A. (Jack) Cioffi, MD, Jean and Richard Deems Professor, Edward S. Harkness Professor, and Chairman of the Department of Ophthalmology.

"When federal support becomes unpredictable, the costs are immediate and lasting. Talent is lost, momentum stalls, and discoveries that could preserve or restore sight are delayed or never realized," he says. "Our investigators are doing everything they can to protect their teams, their science, and the patients who ultimately benefit from this work. But resilience alone is not enough. What is at stake is whether decades of painstaking investment in vision science will continue to yield breakthroughs, or be undone by instability that halts discovery when it matters most. The question is no longer whether discovery is possible, but whether we will act quickly enough to prevent its promise from slipping out of reach for the patients who depend on it. This moment demands urgent action and renewed commitment to sustaining biomedical research."

IMPORTANT PATIENT CARE INFORMATION

Specialties:
Cornea/External Ocular Disease
Glaucoma
Pediatric Ophthalmology and Strabismus
Refractive Surgery/LASIK
Vitreoretinal and Uveitis

Subspecialties:
Applied Genetics
Neuro-Ophthalmology
Ophthalmic Oncology
Oculoplastic and
Reconstructive Surgery

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Viewpoint

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