Growing our Faculty

Faculty Spotlight ~ Scott D. Lawrence

Scott D. Lawrence, MD, Assistant Professor of ophthalmology and Director of the Glaucoma Service, joins UNC Eye after completing a fellowship in glaucoma at the University of Virginia. Dr. Lawrence’s appointment expands the department’s ability to serve children and adults with glaucoma and cataracts and is working with UNC Eye’s researcher, Terete Borras, PhD, on gene therapy for glaucoma.

Dr. Lawrence’s career has encompassed aid work in Africa, China, and Mexico. In 1994, at the height of the Rwandan refugee crisis, he worked in the UN’s largest refugee camp, just over the border in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo. “I served alongside a coalition of physicians from around the world, partnering with groups such as Doctors Without Borders as we cared for hundreds of orphans and unaccompanied children. That experience played a big role in my making a leap into medicine,” he recalls. In his twenties at the time, Lawrence had grown up in northern Virginia, had majored in psychology at the University of Virginia, and was beginning a master’s program at Trinity International University near Chicago.

Lawrence returned to Africa after graduate school. Helping to organize international primary care clinics in Benin, he

Faculty Spotlight ~ J. Niklas Ulrich

After completing his two-year vitreo-retinal surgical fellowship at UNC Eye, J. Niklas Ulrich, MD, has been appointed Assistant Professor in the Department of Ophthalmology, bringing to six the number of retina faculty at UNC Eye.

In his native Germany, Dr. Ulrich received his medical training at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, among Europe’s most prestigious universities. During medical school, an away rotation brought him to Cleveland Clinic in Ohio, and he returned there as a resident in internal medicine. Following this, he served as a resident in ophthalmology at Geisinger Medical Center in Danville, PA.

While at Geisinger, Dr. Ulrich joined an attending physician as a Chief resident at Tilganga Eye Center in Kathmandu, Nepal. “I worked in Kathmandu for a week at a tertiary care center offering care similar to Western standards. Then I went out to an eye hospital near the Indian border where a single surgeon performs up to 250 cataract surgeries a day for indigent people who travel for days to get there. I also joined a group of Nepali and international eye surgeons for a cataract camp where they set up OR tents in the middle of nowhere and operate in the most remote regions under most basic conditions, sometimes without electricity—and have amazing results. Given the ruggedness of the terrain, most people

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Chairman’s Corner
Growing to Serve

In the ten years since I became Chairman of UNC Ophthalmology, North Carolina’s population has grown significantly. But the Kittner Eye Center has grown even faster! We are bursting at the seams at the ACC. While much of this growth is in patients seen, some of our crowding occurs because we have such marvelous new equipment for diagnostic purposes of the complex problems we frequently assess at Kittner. This year marked a significant expansion for us as we opened two new offsite centers. North Carolina is unique geographically in that it is a rural state with several population centers. Away from these population centers, however, there is a dearth of sub-specialists. Often patients must travel significant distances for this level of care.

In New Bern, North Carolina there is a large and excellent medical community, but retina care is limited in this geographic zone. In January 2010, UNC Eye opened a fully staffed and fully equipped retina clinic in New Bern. This center allows sophisticated retinal testing and care to be given locally for eastern North Carolina patients. The clinic is staffed by UNC physicians who fly into New Bern in the morning and return to Chapel Hill in the evening on AHEC aircraft.

In Chapel Hill, UNC Eye absorbed the practice of a retinal practitioner leaving the area and consolidated additional outpatient facilities in the northern area of Chapel Hill. This center will be called UNC Eye Chapel Hill North and when renovated will allow two physicians to work simultaneously. We will be providing retinal, glaucoma and oculoplastic consultative services in this new facility. Both of these facilities are tied into the imaging and medical record system at UNC Hospitals so that all of the patient’s images and clinical data is easily available through our secure computer system.

Growing to serve also means we must continue to build our faculty. This year we have two superb additions: Scott Lawrence, MD and Nik Ulrich, MD. Dr. Lawrence is a particularly welcome addition since UNC Glaucoma has needed to build this service. Dr. Lawrence brings the strength of excellent training and experience plus a life long dedication of service to people which began even before he entered medicine. Dr. Ulrich, who also has served people in areas such as Nepal, has been a fellow with us for two years and will absorb the Chapel Hill North practice as well as adding to the surgical expertise of the faculty.

Through a unique telemedicine project, Seema Garg, MD, PhD, is expanding our service on campus in the virtual world. Many patients with diabetic retinopathy do not get the proper screening to determine whether they have eye disease. Using camera installations in family medicine and internal medicine clinics, Dr. Garg is now able to look at digital images of the retinas of diabetic patients to ensure that the screening rate comes close to 100%. Nationwide diabetic patients are being screened appropriately no more than 50% of the time so this capability represents a great leap forward. Two generous donations from Lions International and the North Carolina Lions Foundations have enhanced our ability to serve the patients with electrophysiologic evaluations for inherited retinal disease. Our new electrophysiologic equipment keeps us in the forefront of these diagnostic capabilities since there is no comparable testing equipment in the state. An exciting new piece of equipment is the retinal oxymeter. It is one of the few machines available in the world which can actually tell how much oxygen is being delivered to the retina by the retinal blood vessels. This information is extremely important in diseases such as venous occlusion, arterial occlusion and diabetes. Initially through research, we expect to learn many exciting new pieces to the puzzle for management of these diseases.

Growth is also taking place in our laboratories. We are currently recruiting basic scientists who will study the retina. Continued investment in basic science is essential to solving today’s intractable problems in vision which are causing visual loss and blindness. Finally, our charity care burden remains high given the economic climate and our position at the University with the commitment to serve all of the people of North Carolina. Last year our charity care amounted to $1,600,000. Only through continued support from our philanthropic donors are we able to provide high quality care for patients and stay on the forefront of medical advances in teaching at the same time. Thank you for your help in our missions.

Eye Reports:
In the Words of our Patients
“...you are to be commended for an exceptional eye care center, #1 in my book!”

—Travis A. Meredith, MD
Building our Ambassador Team

Seeing Details and Serving Others

Thomas and Sara Sears are behind the times—earnestly, honestly, and joyfully there.

“The late eighteenth to early nineteenth century is where we live,” Dr. Thomas Sear, Jr. says in jest. One of the longtime passions of this congenial, civic-minded Greensboro couple is preservation, reconstruction, and rejuvenation, from historic homes to handcrafted furniture. Among Dr. Sears’s avocations, since retiring from his orthodontic practice in 2002, is building Queen Anne Chippendale-style chairs. He also is refurbishing a historic residence in Old Salem. In both endeavors, attention to detail is paramount, and thanks to UNC Eye, Dr. Sears can see to make that happen.

What initially hid her husband’s eyesight problems, Sara Sears conjectures, is that he had worked his entire professional life on a scale of a tenth of a millimeter. In retirement, though, “he was doing things on a much bigger scale. I don’t think he realized that his eyes had changed.” Then one night, about a year into retirement, he couldn’t read a street sign.

His right eye was developing an epiretinal membrane, and in matter of months, he could barely read anything with small print. The loss was dramatic because he had enjoyed superb vision all his life. His vision had been so good that when he was drafted, after graduating from UNC’s School of Dentistry in 1965, the Army said they’d have sent him to flight school were he not a dentist.

Dr. Sears would have three surgeries in his right eye and, ultimately, a lengthy course of medication. He also would become that unusual patient who developed the condition in the other eye. After two more surgeries in his left eye, he now is 20/20.

“It was very very scary,” Dr. Sears says of his experience. “I went three years when I was not on two eyes.” During this time, a respect and friendship grew between Dr. Sears and his retina surgeon, Travis Meredith, MD, Sterling A. Barrett Distinguished Professor and chairman of the department. “It is a dangerous procedure. Dr. Meredith was working through a microscope with two probes, and if you touch the retina, you’re blind forever,” Dr. Sears explains.

“Retina surgeons are my ultimate heroes. I’m one of the poster children for the ophthalmology program at Chapel Hill. It’s a result of incredible surgeons and incredible blessings.”

The perseverance of both her husband and Dr. Meredith was remarkable, Sara Sears adds. “Dr. Meredith worked with Tom for months, always keeping a check on him, while we were doing drops around the clock, and he didn’t give up. Neither did Tom. Eventually we had success, and we are very appreciative of that.”

Today, because Dr. Sears is acutely aware of changes to his eyesight, he serves as a test patient for new equipment at UNC Eye, much of it funded by the Lions Club. In one instance, though his eyes tested 20/20, Dr. Sears felt he was not seeing so well as before. The newest machine revealed a microscopically thicker membrane; an older machine had not picked this up.

The couple is pleased to volunteer as UNC Eye ambassadors. They’ve always been close to UNC. “Ironically, the eye surgery center is located on Mason Farm Road,” Dr. Sears says. “My daddy’s mother was a Mason. Her uncle is the individual who gave the 800 acres where the botanical gardens, Friday Center, and Finley Golf Course are located. My family’s been around here since 1752.”

Dr. Sears continues, “I’ve been very impressed with the department in general, including Dr. Meredith’s surgical skills and his skills in managing the department, which is no small task.” He lauds the broad-ranging research and the department’s goal of serving the whole population of the state, regardless of condition or station in life. “If you sit in the waiting room as much as we have, you get to see all ages of people with eye problems, from every socio-economic group. The people of UNC Eye are very comfortable in trying to reach out to the entire population, and that’s very impressive to Sara and me.”
NEW RESIDENTS

Jonathan Zoghby, MD joins the Kittner Eye Center and the UNC Department of Ophthalmology after completing an internship year in the Department of Internal Medicine at the University of South Alabama Hospitals. Originally from Mobile, Alabama, Dr. Zoghby completed his undergraduate studies in Biological Sciences at the University of Mississippi where he graduated Summa Cum Laude. Dr. Zoghby then returned to Alabama where he went on to receive his medical education at University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Medicine.

Kevin Gertsch, MD joins the Kittner Eye Center and the UNC Department of Ophthalmology after finishing a transitional year at the St. Vincent’s Medical Center in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Originally from Dallas, Texas, Dr. Gertsch received a Bachelor of Science degree in Biochemistry from Brigham Young University before receiving his medical training at St. Louis University School of Medicine in St. Louis, Missouri.

James Wrzosek, MD joins the Kittner Eye Center and the UNC Department of Ophthalmology after completing a preliminary year in the Internal Medicine Department at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign College of Medicine. Born in Buffalo, New York, Dr. Wrzosek completed his undergraduate studies in History at Notre Dame University where he graduated Summa Cum Laude. After completing his Masters in History at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Dr. Wrzosek went on to receive his medical education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign College of Medicine.

Eye Reports: In the Words of our Patients

“Excellent and thorough exam. Great Team!”

Graduated Residents

With the closing of another academic year in June, 2010, UNC Eye again bid farewell to three senior residents as they completed their residency training and pursued employment and further academic achievements.

Upon completion of his residency training, David Russell, MD moved to the west coast to fulfill his commitment to the United States Navy where he is serving as a general ophthalmologist at the Navy Medical Center in San Diego, CA. In July, Mathew Aschbrenner, MD began a two-year Vitreoretinal fellowship at the Barnes Retina Institute at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. Neda Esmaili, MD, former Chief Resident at UNC Eye, will begin a two-year American Society of Ophthalmic and Plastic Reconstructive Surgery fellowship at the Medical College of Wisconsin in July, 2011. Currently, Dr. Esmaili is practicing General Ophthalmology at the Eye Institute of North Carolina in Durham, NC.

All of the faculty, fellows, residents, and staff of UNC Eye would like to wish Drs. Aschbrenner, Russell, and Esmaili all the best with their future endeavors.
noticed that the longest lines of patients were those seeking eye care. “At the time, we were providing only basic care with a primary focus on distributing glasses. Many of the patients unfortunately had advanced ophthalmic conditions: untreated glaucoma, dense cataracts, and ocular infections. I was struck by the impact on a life when vision is impaired and how dependent that person becomes on the care of others. I also realized how, with a very small intervention, you can make a dramatic change in a person’s life.”

Lawrence entered Cornell Medical College where he graduated with honors. During his final year of training he traveled as a visiting medical student to the He Eye Hospital in Shenyang, China, an industrial city in the northeastern part of the country. “They were doing cutting-edge surgery, which was fascinating to me at the time. And they made real efforts to address the challenge of healthcare access. This meant sending buses north to transport patients from more rural areas, including Inner Mongolia. Because of the difficulty and distance of travel, these patients stayed in the hospital for several days before and after surgery – something most of my patients aren’t accustomed to.”

Later on, during his residency at the Hamilton Eye Institute-University of Tennessee, Dr. Lawrence traveled to Ometepec, Mexico as a surgeon for World Cataract Foundation. “International health and development will always be a commitment of mine, especially as it pertains to glaucoma, the second leading cause of blindness in the world.” He says his desire is to have a global impact by helping to develop sustainable glaucoma health projects and to teach and train national health providers in other countries.

Dr. Lawrence and his wife, Tina, have sons James, 9, Jon Nathan, 4, and Joshua, 1.

would not have access to cataract surgery otherwise. The rate of unnecessary blindness due to cataracts is still too high.”

The experience was inspiring. “Helping people, without any thoughts of payment or insurance, is why I went into medicine,” he says.

Dr. Ulrich chose to continue in academic medicine “because I especially like the teaching aspect, the variety of subspecialties together under one roof, and the communications with all the other specialties. It’s a small department with very good relations between faculty and residents. Chapel Hill is the same: kind of small, yet at the same time international and cosmopolitan.”

Dr. Ulrich brings to UNC Eye an interest in far-reaching research. His experiences in Nepal led to a paper presented at the Retina Society meeting in 2008, “Ocular Telemedicine between Nepal and the United States.” Most recently, at the annual American Society of Retina Specialists meeting in Vancouver, he presented preliminary data for a study on measuring retinal temperature in vitrectomy. This multi-center study will include hospitals in Mexico City and in Frankfurt, Germany. Further research interest are in vitreomacular traction and macular degeneration.

Outside of medicine, Dr. Ulrich’s interests include classical music—he is an accomplished pianist—and in particular a love of opera. During medical school, he was a performer with the National Opera in Munich, Germany’s premier opera house. Today he sings tenor in the 150-voice Choral Society of Durham, among this region’s finest symphonic choruses. International travel and languages are also avocations, and in addition to German and English, he also speaks French and Italian. He is also an avid golfer, tennis player and downhill skier. Dr. Ulrich is married to pediatrician Beth A. Ulrich, MD, who practices at Wake Forest Pediatrics in Raleigh. The couple is expecting twins in January.
Residents’ Day Highlights

Kenneth L. Cohen, MD presented with Arthur C. Chandler Teaching Award

Departing senior residents Mathew Aschbrenner, Neda Esmaili, and David Russell presented Kenneth L. Cohen, MD, Professor of Ophthalmology at UNC Eye, with the 2010 Arthur C. Chandler, MD Resident Teaching Award at the annual Residents’ Dinner and Awards Ceremony, which was held on Saturday, June 19, 2010. Presented annually and voted on by the residents, the Chandler Teaching Award is given to the Faculty member the residents feel has most contributed to their education in the previous year. A member of UNC Eye and the Anterior Segment service for over 30 years, Dr. Cohen has dedicated countless hours throughout his career to resident education, specifically with developing an extensive surgical curriculum to assist residents in the development of their surgical skills. As noted by Graham Lyles, MD, Chief Resident at UNC Eye, “the residents at UNC have been extremely fortunate to have Dr. Cohen leading the charge in our surgical training. His years of work have led to a structured and regimented surgical curriculum which countless residents have benefited from over the years.”

David Russell, MD presented with 2010 Frederick W. Stocker Award

At the annual Residents’ Dinner and Awards Ceremony held this year on June 19, 2010, recent UNC Eye residency graduate, David Russell, MD, was presented with the 2010 Frederick W. Stocker Award for Outstanding Resident Research. Dr. Russell was presented the award for his research project titled, “Effect of Radiation on Intraocular Pressure in Patients with Graves’ Orbitopathy.”

Arthur C. Chandler, Jr., MD presents 2010 McPherson Memorial Lecture

Arthur C. Chandler, Jr., MD, retired Professor of Ophthalmology at UNC Eye, presented the 2010 S. Dace McPherson, Jr., Memorial Lecture at the annual Residents Research Day on June 19, 2010. A longtime member of UNC Eye for close to 20 years, Dr. Chandler was invited by the residents to be their guest speaker as this annual event, where he reflected on his 40-plus years in the field of Ophthalmology.

FELLOW UPDATE

Daniel Sines, MD has recently completed the first year of his fellowship training in Ophthalmic Plastic and Reconstructive surgery under the guidance of Jonathan Dutton, MD, PhD and Amy Fowler, MD. Dr. Sines is expected to complete his fellowship training in August, 2011.

Emil Say, MD began his two-year Vitreoretinal fellowship training at the Kittner Eye Center and UNC Department of Ophthalmology in August, 2010. Originally from the Philippines where he received his undergraduate and medical education, Dr. Say joins UNC Eye after completing a one-year research fellowship at the Wills Eye Institute in Philadelphia under the guidance of Drs. Carol and Jerry Shields.
Graham W. Lyles, MD, Chief Resident at UNC Eye, was selected by the American Society of Cataract and Refractive Surgery to be one of ten winners of the 2010 ASCRS Foundation Resident Excellence Award. ASCRS created this award program to recognize excellent resident performance in the areas of research, patient care, leadership, and education. With this award, Dr. Lyles was provided with a $1,000 stipend to be used for travel to the ASCRS Annual Symposium, along with complimentary lodging accommodations and meeting registration.

J. Bruce Baldwin, OD, PhD, Assistant Professor, has been appointed to the board of the Scleral Lens Education Society (SLS) as the treasurer. SLS is a non-profit organization dedicated to teaching contact lens practitioners the science and art of fitting all designs of scleral contact lenses for the purpose of managing corneal irregularity and ocular surface disease. SLS supports public education that highlights the benefits and availability of scleral contact lenses.

Juan Trujillo, Financial Counselor in the UNC Kittner Eye Center, was recently recognized by UNC Healthcare for his outstanding performance and service on the job and was the recipient of one of the 2010 PlusPeople Awards. The PlusPeople Awards were established to recognize those employees who consistently excel at their jobs and who demonstrate an enthusiasm and devotion to duty that inspires others.

David K. Sutton, MD, a senior resident at UNC Eye, placed third in the 2010 Bloomberg Video Competition for cataract / implant surgery residents, which is presented annually by the American College of Eye surgeons. Each year, ophthalmology residents from around the nation submit their surgical videos of a complete and unedited cataract extraction by phacoemulsification. The surgical skills of each applicant are evaluated by the same criteria and specific points established by the American Board of Eye Surgery (ABES) to evaluate candidates for its sub-specialty certification program in cataract / implant surgery. With his third-place submission, Dr. Sutton was awarded a $1,500 prize and was given complimentary registration to the 2010 ACES / SEE QS Seminar.

Ricky D. Bass, MBA, MHA, Associate Chair for Administration at UNC Eye, was recently elected to serve a three-year term on the board for the University Administrators of Ophthalmology (UAO). Mr. Bass, who previously served as the president of the UAO from 2000 – 2002, began his term in July, 2010. The UAO is the leading resource for ophthalmic administrators and provides to its members professional development tools, networking opportunities, and forum for information exchange. Through its efforts to provide professional development to its members, the UAO aims to improve the performance of ophthalmology departments in academic medical centers and other accredited training centers.

Sandy Scarlett, MA, MBA, CFRe, Development Director for UNC Eye, was honored by the Durham Lions Club on May 26, 2010, when she was awarded the club’s Achievement Award. This award is presented each year to the Lion whose history of service to the Community, both with the Lions Club and other community organizations in business and in life, is an example for all Lions to strive toward.

Eye Reports: In the Words of our Patients

“Everyone was helpful, friendly and responsive to my questions.”
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