

# UNC EYE

A healthcare professional in blue scrubs is operating an eye examination machine on a patient. The patient is wearing a blue headband and is seated in a chair. The setting is a clinical examination room with a granite countertop and a sink in the background.

**Quality Eye Care for**

**North Carolinians and Beyond**

# Numbers at a Glance

## UNC OPHTHALMOLOGY

2023-2024  
RESIDENCY  
RECRUITMENT



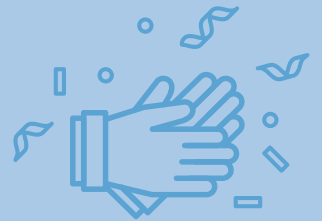
738

Applications



45

Interviews



4

Match Day Class  
of 2028 Residents!

24

Eye  
Specialists

14

Residents  
& Fellows

80+

Administrative /  
Clinical Staff Support



11

Outpatient  
& Surgery  
Locations



# Letter From the Chair



**Donald L. Budenz, MD, MPH**

Kittner Family Distinguished Professor  
Chair, Department of Ophthalmology

Clinical Care is central to the mission of the UNC Department of Ophthalmology. Alongside education and research, it forms one of the three foundational pillars of any academic department, supporting its purpose and goals. Unlike private ophthalmology practices, we are distinguished by our commitment to training future ophthalmologists through hands-on education in clinics and operating rooms, as well as through conducting translational and clinical research to advance treatments to prevent and address blindness. These three pillars — clinical care, education and research — are deeply integral to the mission of UNC Ophthalmology. We encourage our patients to contribute to this mission by allowing our learners to participate in their care and by considering involvement in research studies. This commitment is why clinical care remains at the heart of what we do.

As North Carolina's only public ophthalmology department, we take pride in providing medical and surgical eye care to all residents statewide, regardless of financial circumstances. This is aligned with the UNC School of Medicine's mission to support the health of all North Carolinians. Our department's rate of uncompensated care stands at 12%, the highest within UNC and double the national average. We deliver over \$200,000 in uncompensated care monthly, with no state support for this mission. We provide these services at UNC Kittner Eye Center, as well as at our more rural practices in Alamance, Chatham, and Person Counties. Our dedicated team takes pride in delivering the same high standard of care to all patients, regardless of their ability to pay.

In this edition of UNC EYE, you will learn about three specific aspects of our commitment to caring for the eyes of North Carolinians: 1) The Student Health Action Coalition (the oldest free student-run health clinic in the country); 2) our amazing Comprehensive Eye Care Service, which serves as the gatekeeper for our practice; and 3) how UNC Ophthalmology has met specialty eye care needs in rural Chatham County for over 15+ years. Thank you for partnering with us to ensure our highly trained physician eye specialists can continue to deliver quality eye care equally to all citizens statewide.

**54,182**

**FY24 CLINIC VISITS**  
(All UNC Health Locations)

**2,984**

**FY24 SURGERY CASES**  
(UNC Health)

# Comprehensive Eye Care

## *A Gateway to Detecting and Treating Ocular Disease*

At six regional outpatient clinics and five hospitals across the region, UNC Ophthalmology serves a fast-growing, 10 million+ population as the State of North Carolina's dedicated provider of quality eye care. Like specialty care peers at flagship teaching hospitals nationwide, the department meets the greatest needs for the greatest number of citizens statewide as a tertiary care referrals hub for comprehensive and subspecialty eye care.

As the only means of detecting a range of asymptomatic, insidious eye conditions, screening is the gateway for UNC Ophthalmology's corps of 24 highly trained eye specialists to identify and address all types and stages of ocular conditions. From low- to high-risk individuals, a comprehensive screening exam is a bridge to diagnosis, medical/surgical treatment, and management of early- to late-stage ocular disease.

Community eye care providers who absorb the bulk of screening exams in asymptomatic patients are vital to

UNC Ophthalmology's ability to serve the greatest needs for advanced eye care in citizens statewide. When a large volume of first-time eye exams for low-risk patients remains within community practices, UNC Ophthalmology can invest its physician bandwidth and clinical expertise in routine screening, detection, diagnosis and treatment of ocular anomalies in higher-risk patients.

Patients referred by outside optometry and ophthalmology practices typically have ocular conditions requiring diagnosis, treatment and management by either UNC Ophthalmology's Comprehensive Eye Care (CEC) or subspecialty teams. The CEC team manages patients with ocular surface disorders, dry eyes, and other ocular conditions. The CEC also addresses mild glaucoma, cataracts, mild diabetic retinopathy, and early macular degeneration when these conditions do not require the expertise or surgical skills of UNC Ophthalmology subspecialists.

UNC Assistant Professor of Ophthalmology **Jon Brisley, MD**, is one of three UNC Ophthalmology physicians comprising the CEC team at UNC Kittner Eye Center, the department's highest-volume outpatient clinic. Dr. Brisley is the Kittner clinic's Medical Director.

Dr. Brisley noted: "We focus much of our clinic time on adults ages 65+ who return every one to two years for a comprehensive exam due to increased risk for age-related eye diseases. Our team also closely monitors patients of all ages with systemic illnesses or who take medications that expose them to a greater risk of developing conditions which can impair the visual system.

For example, we monitor patients for corneal changes and scleritis/episcleritis caused by rheumatoid arthritis in older adults, or teenagers on high-risk medications for life-threatening conditions. Our comprehensive team must keep focus on those with the greatest ongoing needs in order to make timely referrals to our subspecialists, as well as protect time to provide general eye care within our scope of expertise."

Once a week, a UNC Ophthalmology pediatric or vitreoretinal specialist visits UNC Medical Center's



Newborn Critical Care Unit to conduct critically timed Retinopathy of Prematurity (ROP) screenings. UNC Ophthalmology is one of several UNC School of Medicine disciplines that contributes expertise in the care of premature neonates. As the leading cause of childhood blindness, ROP can affect extremely premature babies during the period of retinal vessel development which takes place during the first months of life. If significant retinal abnormalities are noted on a screening exam, ROP must be treated within 72 hours of diagnosis in order to prevent permanent vision loss.

Retina expert and Professor of Ophthalmology (Vitreoretinal Surgery) J. Niklas Ulrich, MD, noted: "Critically timed screening of the extreme premature babies for ROP enables us to treat this condition and thus prevent irreversible blindness in approximately 25 babies per year. From pre-term birth to a range of retinal conditions caused by systemic diseases, UNC Eye's vitreoretinal team employs a screen-detect-treat approach as a crucial step for best outcomes in the high-risk patients we treat."



UNC Kittner Eye Center Medical Director Dr. Jon Brisley is one of three physicians on UNC Ophthalmology's comprehensive eye care team. Dr. Brisley conducts comprehensive eye exams in UNC Health patients like Alicia Diggs (pictured) as a bridge to diagnosis, medical/surgical treatment, and management of early- to late-stage ocular disease.

# 11

## Eye Care Locations Across North Carolina

### OUTPATIENT EYE CLINICS

- A UNC Kittner Eye Center (Chapel Hill)
- B UNC Eye Holly Springs
- C UNC Eye Roxboro
- D UNC Park Ophthalmology (Raleigh)
- E UNC Specialty Care at Pittsboro
- F Alamance Eye Care (Burlington)

### OCULAR SURGERY LOCATIONS

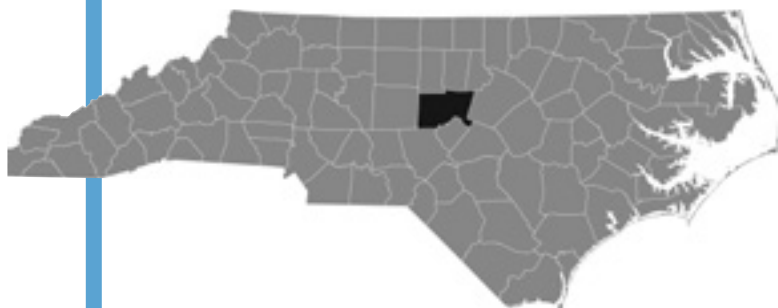
- G UNC Medical Center (Chapel Hill)
- H UNC Hospitals (Hillsborough Campus)
- I North Chapel Hill Surgical Center
- J Chatham Hospital (Siler City)
- K Person Memorial Hospital (Roxboro)



# Glaucoma

## The Role of Specialty Care in Preventing Blindness Among the Aging

As the leading cause of irreversible blindness, glaucoma poses a public health threat wherever aging populations lack access to screen-detect-treat specialty care. From the world's most impoverished areas to its most advanced healthcare system, an alarming 50+% of the estimated 80 million cases of glaucoma go undiagnosed. Many affected adults remain unaware of this asymptomatic "silent blinder" until vision loss characteristically begins in late-stage disease. Without clinical intervention, glaucoma will progress to total, irreversible loss of eyesight. As glaucoma prevalence rises, community health centers (CHCs) have become key collaborative partners in public health strategy in



**TOP** UNC Ophthalmology Vice Chair and Glaucoma specialist Dr. David Fleischman and patient Betty Treadwell at UNC Specialty Care at Pittsboro discuss post-operative care following her procedural treatment for open-angle glaucoma. **BOTTOM** Chatham County's age 65+ adult population has grown 75%+ since 2010 and is the county's fastest-growing demographic\*

reaching higher-risk aging Americans who are most vulnerable to the worst outcomes of this damaging disease.

Across North Carolina's central Piedmont, UNC Ophthalmology's five outpatient locations are vital comprehensive eye care hubs for regional CHCs that provide low- to no-cost basic medical care to uninsured, indigent, minority, rural and other higher-risk populations. For the more vulnerable older patients who lack critical screening care at recommended ages, CHC referrals to UNC's highly trained eye specialists at UNC Health specialty care clinics are key to mitigating the toll of eye diseases that must be diagnosed and managed in older adults via routine screening.

Chatham County, NC, is home to a sizable (25+%), mixed minority (non-white) population. Adults ages 65+ have become the county's fastest-growing demographic (2010-2022: 75%+ increase)\*. In Chatham's Siler City, all ages within the county's predominantly Hispanic population seek no-cost medical care at the 100% volunteer-run CHC Vidas de Esperanza. In Moncure, NC, Piedmont Health SeniorCare's PACE (Program of All Inclusive Care for the Elderly) provides centralized, fixed-cost services to Chatham County seniors, many of whom face barriers to accessing primary and specialty care due to cost and travel across a large rural county. Both CHCs rely upon UNC Pittsboro Specialty Care and Chatham Hospital to help Vidas and PACE seniors receive specialty care at centralized UNC Health medical and procedural locations, respectively.

Vidas Founder and Director Ascary Arias noted: "Our referrals partnership with UNC ophthalmologists at UNC Pittsboro Specialty Care allows Vidas to fill a void where providing basic dental and medical care stops short of meeting needs for aging care eye expertise. Through referrals for eye exams, mammography and other types of screening, UNC Health specialty care clinics are key to helping increase rates of detection for treating chronic disease in Chatham's fast-growing older population."

UNC Professor of Ophthalmology and department Vice Chair **David Fleischman, MD, MS, FACS** provides glaucoma care at UNC Pittsboro Specialty Care and at UNC Kittner Eye Center (Chapel Hill, NC). He noted: "UNC Ophthalmology relies upon its long-time close ties to our regional [CHC] network in order to reach higher-risk populations whom we serve on behalf of the State of North Carolina. We are fortunate to staff our physician expertise across five central North Carolina counties in order to reach higher-risk, older adults who face lack of insurance, transportation, and other resources that leverage early detection to avoid late-stage diagnosis of glaucoma and significant loss of vision."

\*2024: *Our Changing Population: Chatham County, North Carolina (USA Facts)*

# SHAC-Ophtho: No-Cost Eye Care For NC's Underserved

Each month, UNC School of Medicine (SOM) Foundation Phase students lead a no-cost, basic eye care clinic at Carrboro Community Health Center. Altogether removed from patient care at UNC Ophthalmology's six physician-staffed regional clinics, the clinic serves a diverse, under-served population as an extension of UNC SOM's Student Health Action Coalition (SHAC), the nation's oldest student-run, free clinic.

The SHAC-Ophthalmology Clinic (SHAC-Ophtho) is a gateway for SOM students pursuing ophthalmology to learn core eye care skills like screening exams to detect ocular anomalies. SHAC-Ophtho faculty liaison **Meredith Klifto, MD**, mentors student volunteers and leads UNC Ophthalmology Interest Group (OIG) discussion of the specialty as a residency and career choice. She noted:

"[SHAC-Ophtho] helps familiarize students with eye care fundamentals and bridges a gap where ophthalmology is covered less intensely than other disciplines during first- and second-year didactics. Repetitive, hands-on learning at [SHAC-Ophtho] prepares M2s well for the [UNC SOM curriculum] Application Phase and beyond."

Former OIG Co-President **Patrick Le, MD**, began volunteering with SHAC-Ophtho in early medical school. Now in his final year of residency, Patrick reflects:

"Learning advanced techniques and ocular disease pathologies under the tutelage of [SHAC Ophtho's] dedicated faculty mentor — [former UNC Ophthalmology Professor] Dr. Maurice Landers — was pivotal in my journey into ophthalmology. Dr. Landers taught me nearly all the foundational knowledge I've used throughout residency.

[SHAC-Ophtho] patients have been some of my best teachers. Physicians keep learning from the breadth of patients they serve. As a practicing ophthalmologist, I want to continue learning from patients I help in the community and worldwide."

Three 2024-2025 M2s\* currently coordinate the SHAC-Ophtho clinic. Each month, UNC Ophthalmology residents like

Patrick Le spend time after full workdays at SHAC-Ophtho helping students learn essential ophthalmologic fundamentals and techniques. The 2024-2025 M2s noted:

"Residents have helped us gain early exposure to this specialty where it lacks in medical school curriculum. We're grateful for their mentoring in learning tools like the slit lamp and indirect ophthalmoscope and techniques like measuring intraocular pressure, assessing visual fields, and testing extraocular movement, vision and refraction."

Over the past year+, students have greatly expanded SHAC-Ophtho's reach, resources and range of services. The group hosted free glaucoma screenings and counseling at six 2500+attendee community health fairs. Monthly clinic appointments (slots) increased from six to nine. Students also secured donated devices worth \$16,000, including an iCare (ic100) tonometer (intraocular pressure) and an Olleyes (VisuALL VRP S unit) visual field perimeter.

Rising M1s \*\*will soon take over SHAC-Ophtho leadership from current organizers. The group concluded:

"Learning at health fairs that unawareness of no-cost clinics like SHAC pervades many communities reminds us that listening is one of a physician's greatest responsibilities. [SHAC-Ophtho] provides a real-world setting to develop relationships with and listen to the experiences of those who face significant challenges in navigating today's healthcare system. Hearing the barriers to accessing patient care encountered by ill or well individuals teaches us how to better support current and future patients."

Dr. Klifto concluded: "[SHAC-Ophtho's] ability to meet the needs of our under-served community is invaluable. Student volunteers exhibit tremendous enthusiasm in outreach and acquisition of resources to improve what the clinic offers patients. Regardless of socioeconomic background, all patients receive high-quality, compassionate eye care at this terrific student-run community clinic."



**LEFT** Assistant Professor & SHAC-Ophtho Clinic mentor Meredith Klifto, MD, guides UNC School of Medicine M2s Jacob Craft (provider) & Grace Ribadeneyra (patient) through a mock eye screening exam as 2nd-year UNC Ophthalmology resident Vincent Tang observes. **RIGHT** UNC School of Medicine M2 Nyima Sabally provides a no-cost eye screening at the September 2024 La Fiesta del Pueblo in Raleigh, NC.

\* Nyima Sabally, Jacob Craft, Anahita Gupta

\*\* Grace Ribadeneyra, Mary Jae Felizarta, Lissa Neira

In March 2024, UNC Department of Ophthalmology matched four high-achieving medical students who are now our residency program's Class of 2028. These four PGY1 interns were asked:

## “ Why UNC Ophthalmology? ”



### **Cheng Jiao, MD**

I picked UNC Ophthalmology because it provides a structured approach to developing early surgical skills through the wet lab, ensuring hands-on learning from the start. Furthermore, the resident clinic offers me the opportunity to take ownership of patient care with a longitudinal focus across diverse subspecialties each day. Most importantly, UNC's commitment to serving a diverse population, including those without insurance or a history of routine care, resonates with me. These individuals often fall through the cracks in the healthcare system, and I am eager to make a meaningful difference in their lives by providing them care.



### **Vihar Naik, MD**

The UNC Ophthalmology residency program promotes an exceptionally collegial and supportive training environment in which residents have ample opportunity to grow. The breadth of clinical exposure is remarkable with the opportunity to manage a wide variety of cases, from routine to highly complex. Faculty are approachable, invested, and genuinely committed to our development both professionally and personally. This sense of community and collaboration makes UNC an enriching place to train and an ideal environment for cultivating compassionate and adept ophthalmologists.



### **Tika Zbornik Thompson, MD**

The culture of a residency program is very important to me. Everyone from the interns to attending physicians at UNC Ophthalmology are welcoming, compassionate, and dedicated to providing both excellent patient care to our diverse patient population and excellent training to the residents. As a UNC medical student, I experienced the dedication to teaching and passion for education that the attending faculty at UNC Ophthalmology embody. I knew that I would fit well in this program and gain a high-quality education that will put me in a strong position to pursue fellowship at the end of residency.



### **Dhruv Shah, MD**

Serving all members of my community, especially those who need it most, is integral to my identity. That is a large part of not only why I chose to be a physician, but also why I chose to train with UNC Ophthalmology. The entire team at UNC, from the ophthalmic technicians to the doctors, goes above and beyond to take care of every eye and every patient, regardless of who they are or what they can pay. This is why I love UNC — because I know we do not let anyone fall through the cracks.



# UNC Eye Symposium 2024

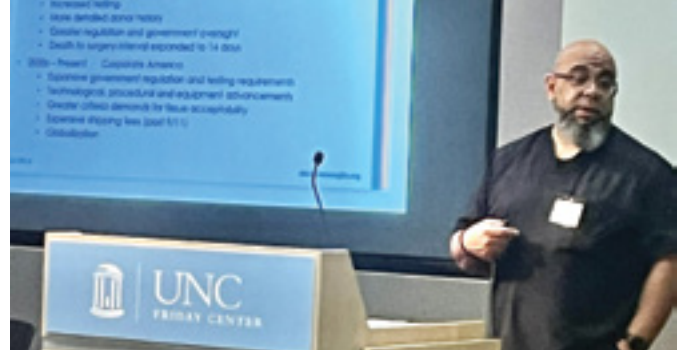
Mid-April 2024, UNC Ophthalmology faculty, residents, fellows and ophthalmic technicians joined eye care professionals from across the Southeast for the 2024 UNC EYE Symposium. Each year, this event informs attendees on the latest in evidence-based diagnostic and medical/surgical approaches to comprehensive eye care and management of ocular disorders and external (eye) disease.

At this day-long event, a panel of UNC Ophthalmology clinical faculty and distinguished guest speakers shared their expertise in all major subspecialty areas of ophthalmology practice, including **Retina, Pediatric Ophthalmology, Neuro-Ophthalmology, Glaucoma,**

## Oculoplastics-Reconstructive Surgery and Corneal & External (Eye) Disease.

The 2024 UNC EYE Symposium drew this annual event's largest audience to date (213 participants). Residency Program Director and 2024 UNC Eye Symposium Co-Course Director Alice Zhang, MD, stated:

"The [2024] UNC Eye Symposium had a stellar line up of expert guest lecturers in every ophthalmic subspecialty. The topics discussed are all highly clinically relevant and applicable. Our expanding roster of distinguished speakers enhances the breadth and depth of continuing medical education opportunities."



**TOP** (L to R): Over 200 eye care professionals from across the Southeast attended the 2024 UNC Eye Symposium; [Former] UNC Assistant Professor & Neuro-Ophthalmology expert **Maja Kostic, MD, MPH, PhD**, with UNC Ophthalmology residents. **BOTTOM** (L to R): UNC Professor of Ophthalmology and Vitreoretinal/Uveitis expert **J. Niklas Ulrich, MD**; Miracles in Sight Vice President of Operations **Michael Tramber, MBA, CEBT, CTBS**, overviews "Eye Banking 101" with ophthalmic technicians.

## UNC EYE SYMPOSIUM

with Technician Continuing Education Session



Saturday, April 12, 2025 at  
The William and Ida Friday Center  
for Continuing Education

SAVE  
the DATE  
2025

# New Faculty



**Gabriella Szatmáry, MD, PhD**  
Neuro-Ophthalmology  
January 2024



**Rodolfo Bonatti, MD**  
Adult & Pediatric  
Glaucoma  
February 2024



**Alessandro Iannaccone, MD, MS, FARVO**  
Retina/Inherited  
Retinal Diseases  
March 2024



**Arpita Maniar, MBBS, MD**  
Ocular Oncology  
April 2024



**Mohammad Soleimani, MD, FICO**  
Corneal & External Disease  
July 2024



**Bonnie Sklar, MD**  
Corneal & External Disease  
August 2024



**Marlee Silverstein, MD**  
Adult & Pediatric  
Ophthalmology  
August 2024



**Chris Morais, MD**  
Neuro-Ophthalmology  
November 2024

## Patient Shout-Outs to Our Terrific Team!

Dr. Rubinstein is a true rockstar in his profession and a great human being.

I cannot say enough good things about Dr. Fleischman.

Dr. Klifto is a terrific clinician and a great communicator.

Dr. Brewington was very informative and caring.



New faculty are listed under the UNC Ophthalmology division linked to their area of clinical expertise. Scan the code to visit UNC Ophthalmology's A-Z Clinical Faculty page for detailed information on all faculty members' medical and surgical areas of expertise.

# Friends of UNC Ophthalmology

## George & Paula Meyer



Chapel Hill residents George and Paula Meyer have been UNC Ophthalmology patients and supporters for many years. Glaucoma specialist David Fleischman, MD, MS, FACS, has a long-standing patient-physician relationship with both George and Paula. The Meyers noted:

“We are pleased to support exciting breakthrough research that Dr. Fleischman is leading as it advances through developmental stages. Through one large-scale project we help fund, we’re optimistic Dr. Fleischman’s research will one day provide hope and new treatment options to millions of people worldwide.”

## Jackie Cunningham: UNC Health "Patient Experience" Superstar

In October 2024, UNC Health’s Patient Experience and Employee Engagement team named UNC Kittner Eye Center Ophthalmic Manager **Jackie Cunningham, COT, OSC** as its October 2024 “Superstar.” UNC Ophthalmology congratulates Jackie and is thrilled to have one of our own clinic leaders honored for her impact on the system’s overall patient relations and operational goals!

Patient Experience and Employee Engagement Executive Director **Tracy Carroll, MSN, RN, NE-BC, CPXP, CMSRN** stated: “Jackie has infused [UNC Ophthalmology] with renewed energy and enthusiasm. Over summer, she diligently covered Chapel Hill’s [Kittner] clinic, attended all strike team meetings, and actively worked to enhance the patient experience. Jackie reviews data, follows up on comments, and coaches her teammates.

Thanks to Jackie’s dedication, our staff can articulate the principles of UNC Health’s Carolina Care [goal],

and the Kittner Eye Center team has shown noticeable improvement in staff engagement. Because of Jackie’s efforts, the Chapel Hill and Holly Springs clinics ranked among [UNC Health’s] Top 10 most improved clinics for [FY’25 Q1]! We are incredibly grateful to have such a Superstar on our team!”

Jackie reflected: “It’s exciting to advance our patient experience goals and build on our progress at our [UNC Eye] Chapel Hill and Holly Springs clinics. Enhancing patient care and staff engagement remains a top priority for our dedicated ophthalmology clinical and administrative team. I’m grateful to have such an incredible team who work together to achieve our goals.”





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of NORTH CAROLINA  
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Department of Ophthalmology  
5144 Bioinformatics Building  
Campus Box 7040  
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-7040



 **UNC**  
HEALTH CARE  
KITTNER EYE CENTER

## UNC Ophthalmology Locations

### UNC Kittner Eye Center

2226 Nelson Highway, Suite 200  
Chapel Hill, NC 27517  
Appts: 984-974-2020

### UNC Eye Holly Springs

781 Avent Ferry Road  
Holly Springs, NC 27540  
Appts: 984-974-4040

### UNC Park Ophthalmology

6512 Six Forks Rd #105  
Raleigh, NC 27615  
Appts: 919-846-6915

### UNC Eye at Roxboro

615 Ridge Road  
Roxboro, NC 27573  
Appts: 984-208-6178

### UNC Specialty Care at Pittsboro

75 Freedom Parkway  
Pittsboro, NC 27312  
Appts: 984-215-3220

### Alamance Eye Center

1016 Kirkpatrick Rd  
Burlington, NC 27215  
Appts: 336-228-0254



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For Appointments and Information,  
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