Dear colleagues and friends,

I was honored to attend the Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Science’s annual retreat earlier this summer to hear about the department’s tremendous success and growth. As I mentioned then, optimizing the patient and family experience is one of my true passions, so I’d like to share a few updates on our UMass Memorial Medical Center strategy. We are designing a five-year roadmap that features one consistent theme: patients and families are at the center of everything we do. Our core guiding principles – respect and dignity, information sharing, active participation in care, and collaboration – must define every patient interaction we have. The Medical Center has the science and technology to be a modern, world-class organization, but that distinction requires that every patient and family has the same exceptional experience every day. Specific initiatives in each of the following seven areas will help us get there:

- Patient and Family Support Programs
- Hospital and Department Improvements
- Leadership Commitment
- Behavioral and Service Training
- Feedback and Service Recovery
- Healing Environment
- Patient and Family Engagement

Ongoing patient feedback will also guide our work, as illustrated by this recent comment by an Eye Center patient in our new ambulatory survey:

“Dr J is an excellent doctor. She is thorough, efficient, compassionate, and kind. Thanks to her guidance, my sarcoid related uveitis is stable!! I like her so much that I recommended her to my sister-in-law.”

In closing, thank you for your dedication to our patients and for your continued modeling of what it means to deliver a top-notch UMass Memorial experience through such efforts as same-day urgent care, extended hours and a robust community presence.

All the best,
Michael Gustafson, MD, MBA
President, UMass Memorial Medical Center
CHAIR INSIGHT: FIVE YEARS IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE

June 21 marked my 5th Anniversary here at UMass Memorial Health and the University of Massachusetts Medical School. It’s unbelievable to me that five years have passed so quickly. For the Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences, specifically, we’ve seen an incredible amount of change and growth. And as I reflect on the past five years, one thing is unmistakably clear, these remarkable achievements are not mine alone. It took the hard work of each and every one of you to believe in our vision for the UMass Memorial Eye Center and help us realize it, and I could not be more proud of or more grateful for our amazing team members.

With perseverance and team work, over the past five years, the Eye Center underwent an astonishing transformation – going from a program that was relatively unknown to opening new locations, becoming one of the top-performing service lines in the system, expanding vision research, and developing the first new ophthalmology residency programs in the nation in the past 20 years! In July, we’ll welcome our third class of residents, bringing us to six residents filling all of our spots at the Eye Center, and two additional matched residents who will begin their integrated internship year in July and will join us at the Eye Center next July.

Looking ahead to the next five years, each of our team members attended a strategic retreat to reflect on ways to continue to move the Eye Center forward. I’m so pleased to have promoted two of our outstanding faculty members to Vice Chair roles for the Eye Team: Claudio Punzo, PhD, Vice Chair of Research, and Haijiang Lin, MD, Clinical Vice Chair. Together, they will assist in this work as I continue to lead my phenomenal team at the Eye Center, and now serve as President of UMass Memorial Medical group and Senior Associate Dean for Health Strategies at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, as well. I have every confidence that Dr. Punzo and Dr. Lin will positively impact our team while continuing to successfully achieve our goals.

We’re emerging from a very tough year following the COVID-19 pandemic. Our Eye Center came out strong and optimistic. Our achievements during this time are beyond any dreams I could have had for this department and that’s simply because this type of success cannot be the dream of one person alone. Thank you for dreaming with me!

Shlomit Schaal, MD, PhD, MHCM
Professor and Department Chair

DR. SCHAAAL JOINS RETINA LEADERS IN DIVERSITY DISCUSSION

Shlomit Schaal, MD, PhD, MHCM, President, UMass Memorial Medical Group, and Chair, Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences, recently joined in a Retina Today roundtable discussion with fellow ophthalmology chairs from hospitals across the country. Together, they discussed their journeys to leadership, including hurdles, lessons learned, future aspirations, and experiences with diversity and inclusion as related to their careers, for the publication’s women in retina issue. Read excerpts from the dialogue or listen to the full conversation in the New Retina Radio Podcast.

Top: Audina M. Berrocal, MD; Shlomit Schaal, MD, PhD, MHCM; R.V. Paul Chan, MD, MSc, MBA, FACS. Bottom: María H. Berrocal, MD; Sophie J. Bakri, MD, MBA.
STAFF INSIGHT

Jessica Peterson CRA, COA, Lead Ophthalmic Photographer

Shortly after graduating from Fitchburg State University in 2014, I started working in Ophthalmology at Tufts Medical Center in Boston. I joined the Eye Center in 2018 as an Ophthalmic Technician/Photographer, and I was promoted to Lead Photographer in January 2021. As a lead, I make sure that there is enough coverage to meet the imaging needs of the clinic. I am responsible for training the imaging team and making sure that both the clinic flow and imaging equipment continue to run smoothly. The Eye Center has grown so much since I started, and so has the amount of imaging. There was only one photographer when I started here, and now we have at least two photographers most days. We also have lots of new and upgraded imaging equipment. Our patients are often impressed at how high tech and efficient the imaging process is, which makes me happy because I know that the patients feel confident about the quality of their care. What I like most about being an ophthalmic photographer is that I am always learning new things from the doctors, and that I am making an impact in how we care for our patients. I hope that, as the Eye Center continues to grow, the imaging team continues to grow as well, and that we can keep focusing on doing the best we can for our patients.

OPHTHALMOLOGY DEPARTMENT SAYS FAREWELL AS SAMUEL LEE MAN MOVES ON TO MEDICAL SCHOOL

Samuel Leeman bids farewell after serving for three years with the Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences. Sam came to us in 2018 to develop a new scribing program in the Ophthalmology Department. Contributing to the rapidly expanding department, he worked directly with several subspecialist ophthalmologists on a regular basis, including medical retina, uveitis and oculoplastics. As a scribe, Sam assisted in many aspects of patient visits and the electronic medical record while gaining a strong foundation of clinical ophthalmology knowledge. Read more.
DEPARTMENT OF OPHTHALMOLOGY APPOINTS NEW VICE CHAIRS

FACULTY INSIGHT
HAIJIANG LIN, MD, PHD
CLINICAL VICE CHAIR OF OPHTHALMOLOGY

I’m so pleased to have been appointed as Clinical Vice Chairman in the Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Science at UMass Memorial Medical Center. Our department is growing so fast under the direction of Department Chair Shlomit Schaal, MD, PhD, MHCM, over the last five years; it’s my honor to be a part of this dream team. I’m committed to continuing to work hard to build up our center as the best place to receive eye care.

In my new role, I plan to collaborate with the department’s executive team to ensure the completion of ad-hoc assignments as delegated by the department chair, and will be in charge of managing clinical operations, education, training, and clinical research. I will be working with department managers to make sure the clinic remains highly productive, provides high-quality eye care and maintains excellent patient satisfaction scores. I will work with physicians and staff to ensure physician and staff engagement and wellness in our department, and I will continue to lead our department to be one of the top departments for innovation. I’m excited to work with all division directors to recruit new faculty to build a strong subspecialty team.

FACULTY INSIGHT
CLAUDIO PUNZO, PHD
RESEARCH VICE CHAIR OF OPHTHALMOLOGY

I’m very grateful to Dr. Schaal for providing me with this opportunity to serve as the Vice Chair of Research for the Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences. I’m appreciative of the confidence she’s placing in me to grow our department and move it forward.

In my new role as the Vice Chair of Research, I will work to expand our faculty and strengthen our department in the field of research by hiring new tenure-track faculty members and helping our current junior faculty develop and become more independent. I will be working to create research programs for clinical faculty and residents, and I’m committed to building our research program by securing additional grant support for large projects, specifically multi-lab collaborative grants. We are still a young department, and I look forward to helping us grow, strengthen and become recognized on a national level.

It has been my pleasure watching our program evolve over the past five years into a more clinically driven research portfolio. We have a talented team of researchers, who are all dedicated to developing new treatment modalities for retinal degenerative diseases. It is my privilege to lead this team.
RESEARCH INSIGHT

DR. TIANXIAO HUAN LAUNCHES PROTEOMICS STUDY FOR AGE-RELATED MACULAR DEGENERATION IN SEDDON LAB

Age-related macular degeneration (AMD) is a complex and multifactorial disease. Currently, there’s no effective treatment for geographic atrophy, AMD, the advanced dry form that impairs central vision. There’s an urgent need for the discovery of effective biomarkers and drug targets that prevent or delay advanced AMD. The team of Johanna Seddon, MD, ScM, and Tianxiao Huan, PhD, (right) aim to reveal the molecular pathogenic mechanism of AMD and identify new therapeutic targets for the prevention, treatment, or delay of advanced AMD. A pilot study of this project has been funded by a Worcester Foundation 2021 grant.

Tianxiao Huan, PhD, (left) Assistant Professor, joined the Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences and the Macular Degeneration Center of Excellence in October 2020. Dr. Huan’s research spans several areas. In the past decade, she conducted integrated genomic research to identify the pathogenic genes and pathways for age-related human complex diseases, including cardiovascular diseases, hypertension, human aging, and mortality. She has participated in numerous high-impact research projects and developed leadership skills by serving as the primary analyst for many projects in the Framingham Heart Study and large genetic and genomic study consortium, such as the Cohorts for Heart and Aging Research in Genomic Epidemiology (CHARGE) consortium and NHLBI’s The Trans-Omics for Precision Medicine Program (TOPMed). As the lead author, she published the largest resources of genetic variants related to microRNA expression (Nat Commun 2015) and DNA methylation (Nat Commun 2019). She constructed a microRNA age predictor and a DNA methylation mortality predictor, both of which outperformed published age predictors in predicting all-cause mortality and cause-specific mortality (Aging Cell 2018, Genome Biol. 2021). As a skilled computational biologist and a statistical geneticist, Dr. Huan brings unique vision of applying multi-omics techniques and available big-data resources to advance our knowledge of AMD and other retinal disorders. She’s delighted to be a member of a cohesive group of outstanding colleagues with interdisciplinary research background.

Johanna M. Seddon, MD, ScM, Professor, is the Director of Retina and Director of the Macular Degeneration Center of Excellence in the Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences at UMass Memorial Eye Center. Dr. Seddon is a world-renowned retina specialist and genetic epidemiologist, who pioneered the studies of the etiology and prevention of AMD. Dr. Seddon established the AMD registry and biorepository biobank, which is one of the largest AMD cohorts with unique characteristics, including both standardized clinical phenotype data and longitudinal prospective data. Whole-genome genotyping data for more than 10,000 samples have been measured. This work has yielded new gene discoveries and more than 250 publications. Many results have been incorporated into the current management of patients with AMD, and have also led to new targets for therapies determined by the underlying genetic and lifestyle characteristics of patients, which are being tested in clinical trials.
In the recently released UMass Memorial Health Anthem video, dozens of caregivers were filmed to help explain to the world who we are, what we do and what we stand for as a health care system. Find out more about these caregivers and why they were chosen to be in the video to demonstrate how it takes everyone, everyday working together relentlessly to care for our patients and each other.

As a primary care optometrist at UMass Memorial Eye Center, Firas Kassira, OD, manages his patients’ visual function, ocular health and related medical conditions — shaping how they see the world, quite literally.

In this year of COVID-19, the world sometimes looks foreboding and scary. That’s why Dr. Kassira goes above and beyond to ensure his patients get the compassionate care they need. His relentless approach to caregiving goes beyond patients’ vision exams. When Dr. Kassira looks into their eyes, he sees them as people. And he is there to help.

“Almost every one of my patients comes in with a little bit of sadness,” Dr. Kassira said. “I’ve started to listen more to patients’ needs other than just their eyes, because I know that they’re being affected by their lack of social interaction and their [limited] ability to leave their homes and see their families and some of their doctors, also. I’ve taken some extra time just to listen to them and see what struggles they’re having. I try to put them at ease as much as I can and lift them up a little bit. At least I try to put a smile on their faces before they leave.”

Dr. Kassira’s empathy for others extends to his UMass Memorial colleagues.

“Dr. Kassira is not only a kind, caring, experienced, capable optometrist, but he is also a relentless LEAN leader who brings his innovative ideas to our weekly huddles and inspires our eye team to continuously improve our environment to allow better and safer patient care,” said Shlomit Schaal, MD, PhD, MHCM, President, UMass Memorial Medical Group, and Chair, Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences. “I feel incredibly lucky to have him on our faculty in the Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences.”

The Anthem video helped Dr. Kassira see the total UMass Memorial team working together, standing up for patients and supporting each other during these challenging times. “It’s a huge team working together. You don’t see that in your everyday business necessarily, but the big picture makes it much clearer,” he said. “I was really impressed. The music was phenomenal, as were the impressive views of the buildings and facilities, the equipment, and all the caregivers in their varied environments and elements. It made you feel as if you were part of a UMass Memorial superhero team — ready to fight disease and heal the world.”

When he’s not practicing optometry at UMass Memorial’s Hahnemann and Northborough campuses, Dr. Kassira enjoys cycling with his family along Massachusetts’ rail trails.

Looking back on 2020, Dr. Kassira said it’s important for caregivers to support each other as they work tirelessly to care for patients. “Our ability to bounce back is only possible when we can help and educate each other about this pandemic,” he said. “The caring approach helps you deal with it. I think we’ve become a lot stronger now from this experience.”
As I enter the last year of my Ophthalmology residency this July, I will also be starting my role as the first Administrative Chief Resident of our Ophthalmology Residency Program. The responsibilities of Chief Resident include acting as a liaison between faculty and residents, assisting with resident clinical schedules, coordinating conferences and educational programming with the department, and serving as an advocate for residents to further improve their clinical environment. As a new Ophthalmology Residency program, it has been very exciting to see the department expand, including the residency complement. Starting in July 2021, we will have our full PGY2, PGY3, and PGY4 classes filled with a total of six residents (two residents per post-graduate year), in addition to two residents starting their integrated Ophthalmology internship at UMass Memorial Medical Center. Each year that goes by since the start of my Ophthalmology Residency in 2019, the hospital community becomes more aware of the academic commitment of our faculty and the strength that the residents bring to our clinical and academic mission. Other members of the clinical system see our residents on the inpatient units, the intensive care units, the emergency departments, and in the operating room, as we gain more knowledge on how to treat urgent and emergent ophthalmic conditions. The growth of our residency program, as well as the department in terms of faculty and staff, bring about new opportunities for everyone. One of the strengths of our Ophthalmology program is our focus on quality improvement and Lean methodology. Residents have a unique opportunity to seek out areas to enhance not just their own clinical experiences, but also those of all faculty and staff within the department. We’ve started and completed projects related to patient information/education, organization of clinical equipment as well as call supplies and materials, and documentation of urgent patient telephone calls. A dynamic Eye Center such as this is a perfect setting for learning from dedicated faculty and for resident success. Over the next year, I look forward to contributing to the development of the residency program during my time as Chief Resident, and assisting residents in their journey to become the best clinicians and critical thinkers they can be.

WORK SHINES AT RESIDENTS’ DAY PROGRAM

On June 25, residents and faculty joined together for the UMass Memorial Eye Center’s second Residents’ Day program, marking the end of the academic year. Priya Janardhana, MD, Educator of the Year 2020, started the program with a special introduction of guest speaker, John Gittinger, Physician and Surgeon, Mass Eye and Ear, Senior Lecturer, Harvard Medical School, and former UMass Chair, before turning the focus to resident doctors Aron Sampson, MD, Omar Abdelmegid, MD, Saad Al-Kadhi, MD, MS, and Soraiya Thura, MD, who each presented a detailed review of their work of the past year. The program concluded with Benjamin Jastrzembski, MD, being selected by the residents as Educator of the Year 2021.

Director of the Residency Program, Misha Faustina, MD, congratulated the entire team for the program’s success, which she credited to the attention of Lean-tailored problem solving and the diversity of its members. “When we created this program, we wanted it to be diverse. I think it’s the differences that each of us brings that creates strength within our team and allows each person and their unique perspectives to shine,” said Dr. Faustina. “We want to be known as the new, innovative model for modern academics in efficient, cutting-edge medicine.”

The Eye Center is pleased to welcome the next two classes of residents in July, which will result in all eight of our program’s residency slots being filled. The full complement of the program includes the first, new ACGME-approved ophthalmology residency training program in more than two decades and the first new program to offer an integrated internship. Congratulations to all!
EYE CENTER GAINS INPUT FROM ALL STAKEHOLDERS DURING STRATEGIC RETREAT

In June, the team from UMass Memorial Eye Center held a half-day strategic retreat to discuss the future trajectory of the Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences. Teams from the UMass Memorial eye clinic, University of Massachusetts Medical School, along with special guests from leadership, and Marketing and Communications, joined in thoughtful conversation about the future tactics and direction of the department.

“As I virtually ‘flew’ from one breakout room to another, I felt incredible pride, pleasure and gratitude to be able to observe the high quality of our people, our Eye Team,” shared Shlomit Schaal, MD, PhD, MHCM, President of UMass Memorial Medical Group and Professor and Chair of the Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences. “It was heartwarming for me to witness all of you: your personal involvement, your deep thoughtfulness and your strong commitment to the future of our department.”

The event kicked off with presentations by Michael Gustafson, MD, MBA, President, UMass Memorial Medical Center, and Eric Dickson, MD, MPH, MHCM, President and CEO, UMass Memorial Health, before moving onto breakout sessions where groups went into deep discussion on a few areas of focus, including the areas of: Clinical, Research, Education and Community Outreach.

Prior to the retreat, all team members were asked to complete a questionnaire to provide feedback on their perceived strengths and weakness of each area of focus, and choose an area of interest to participate in. From that information, breakout room leaders created a feedback summary to drive the discussions.

Moving forward, leaders will finalize the strategy recommendations from each breakout group, which will be compiled and used to develop the department’s overall strategy for the next five years, focusing on those four main missions.

“The Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences has undergone a monumental transformation over the past five years,” said Dr. Schaal. “With the expert, dedicated, wonderful team we have in place, I have no doubt that our next five years will be equally, if not more, successful! Thank you for all that you have done and continue to do to make UMass Memorial Eye Center the amazing place it is today!”