

From the office of:

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The University of Pittsburgh Welcomes Dr. José-Alain Sahel as Chair of the Department of Ophthalmology

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I am very excited to inform you that I have selected Dr. José-Alain Sahel to succeed Dr. Joel Schuman as Chair of the Department of Ophthalmology. Dr. Sahel is Professor of Ophthalmology at the Université Pierre-et-Marie-Curie in Paris, the medical school of the Sorbonne. Dr. Sahel also holds the position of Cumberlege Professor of Biomedical Sciences at the Institute of Ophthalmology, University College London. He is Chairman of the

Departments of Ophthalmology at the Quinze-Vingts National Eye Hospital and at the Rothschild Ophthalmology Foundation. He coordinates the Paris-based Ophthalmology Clinical Investigation Center, overseeing more than 50 clinical trials, many of them within the most advanced areas of biomedical technology, such as retinal implants and gene therapy. He heads the French National Reference Center for Retinal Dystrophies and chairs a network of more than 90 European clinical trial centers focused on retinal diseases. For personal reasons, Dr. Sahel and his family have decided to move to the United States, and with many competing offers from this country's leading academic medical centers, Dr. Sahel and his family have chosen Pittsburgh. He will assume the chairmanship on July 1, 2016.

José Sahel is the founder and director of the Vision Institute in Paris, a site for translational research on treatments for currently untreatable inherited and age-related ocular diseases. José established this Institute eight years ago, and it now comprises 20 principal investigators and nearly 300 staff members housed in its own building.



José-Alain Sahel, MD, PhD

*Incoming Chairman of Ophthalmology
University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine
The Eye & Ear Foundation Endowed Chair*

The Institute functions in synergy with the Quinze-Vingts National Eye Hospital. The primary focus of Dr. Sahel's fundamental and clinical research is an understanding of the mechanisms associated with retinal degeneration, together with the conception, development, and evaluation of innovative treatments for retinal diseases, such as stem cell implantation, gene therapy, innovative pharmacologic approaches, and the artificial retina.

In landmark work, Dr. Sahel and his collaborators discovered Rod-derived Cone Viability Factor (RdCVF), a protein secreted in the normal retina that protects cone photoreceptors. This discovery provided the biological basis for paracrine interactions between rods and cones, showing that these interactions play a critical role in maintaining the viability of photoreceptor cells [Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA, 1998; Nature Genetics, 2004; Cell, 2015].

For more information
on our research, please contact:
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Research donations can be made at
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RdCVF has been shown to preserve central vision in several of the blinding human diseases. In addition to research on the developmental biology of the eye, functional genomics, physiology, and therapeutics, Dr. Sahel's Institute and his own laboratory conduct research on the development of high resolution in vivo cellular imaging, relevant biomarkers, and disease models. This work has proven to be extremely attractive to industry. Moreover, Dr. Sahel is a co-inventor on more than 40 patents, several of which have led to start-up companies including Fovéa Inc., which Dr. Sahel founded and which became the Ophthalmologic Division of Sanofi Aventis. He is also a scientific co-founder of GenSight Biologics Inc. and Pixium Vision Inc.

José-Alain Sahel was born in Algeria and studied medicine at Strasbourg University and in Lariboisière, Saint-Louis. He received his medical degree with a Medal of the Faculty of Paris and obtained his specialty certification in Ophthalmology. He spent his first two academic decades in the University Hospital of Strasbourg as an ophthalmologist and later moved to the Quinze-Vingts National Eye Hospital in Paris, where he became department head in 2001. As noted earlier, at the same time, he held the position of Chief of Ophthalmology at the Rothschild Foundation. In Paris, his laboratory became the core of the Vision Institute, which he founded in 2008. The Institute is now one of the largest centers of integrated research on eye diseases worldwide. The Vision Institute is widely recognized as the world's leading center for basic and clinical

research on vision, and it conducted one of the first clinical gene therapy trials, as well as becoming the French National Reference Center on Retinal Dystrophies, with the participation of more than 5,000 patients.

José was one of the pioneers in research on visual prostheses, allowing visually disabled patients to regain autonomy with recognition of objects or words, orientation, and mobility. Applications of the results obtained in the international multi-center trial of retinal prostheses have recently received FDA approval. His Institute and the spin-off company Pixium Vision are developing, in partnership with Stanford, high-resolution prostheses.

In addition to his training in ophthalmology, Dr. Sahel had a residency in neurology and neurosurgery at the Louis Pasteur University Hospital in Strasbourg, and he is certified by the French National Board in ophthalmology.

Between 1986 and 1992, José was a research fellow in ophthalmology at the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary, Harvard Medical School; a visiting scholar in the Department of Cellular and Developmental Biology at Harvard; and a visiting lecturer at Harvard Medical School. Dr. Sahel has authored or co-authored more than 400 peer-reviewed articles.

In summary, José-Alain Sahel is a clinician-scientist in vision research, focusing his main interest on cellular and molecular mechanisms which underlie retinal degeneration. He conducts translational research which integrates new basic research concepts

in a clinical perspective, and the major thrust of his clinical research is the development of treatments for currently untreatable retinal diseases such as retinitis pigmentosa, age-related macular degeneration, and vascular eye disease — using pharmacologic approaches, gene therapy, and stem cell implantation.

Dr. Sahel will sustain his engagement with the Vision Institute in Paris through a partnership formed between that Institute, the Sorbonne, our medical school, and UPMC. I believe that this relationship will hold tremendous value for our institution and for the Vision Institute in Paris. Even so, Dr. Sahel's major interest at this point in his exceptional career is to continue to strengthen our Department of Ophthalmology, and while he is a gifted scientist at the very basic level, his transcendent goal is to apply the results of research to patient care with immediacy.

Given that perceptive impairment from disorders of vision is a very strong risk factor for cognitive loss, dependence, depression, and trauma, Dr. Sahel's decision to join us could not have greater importance, especially in a region of the country with an aging population.

Finally, I want to note that José-Alain Sahel is a physician-scientist with a broad and deep intellectual reach, and I believe that his influence here, while clearly focused on our Department of Ophthalmology, will have great institutional impact. Please join me in welcoming Dr. Sahel and his family to our institution and to Pittsburgh.