

2012 SIGHT + SOUND

FALL EDITION



New Research Focuses on HPV Related Head and Neck Cancers

by Virginia Nelson

The exciting research of Dr. Robert Ferris MD, PhD, FACS could have a significant impact on the understanding, treatment, and long term wellness of patients with Head and Neck Cancer. Traditionally understood to be associated with lifestyle choices such as heavy consumption of tobacco/alcohol, H&N cancer rates are consistently increasing in otherwise healthy patients. Consequently, the overall rate of development of these cancers remains stable, ranking as the sixth most common cancer worldwide, despite a general decline in levels of smoking and substance abuse.

Advances in research have shown this steady rate of cancers of the head and neck to be largely attributed to the Human Papillomavirus (HPV). HPV is contracted through normal human contact and affects 90-95% of the entire population at some point during the lifecycle. And, in a very small percent of individuals whose immune systems are unable to fend off the virus, serious health risks can arise.

Dr. Ferris was a resident at John Hopkins University specializing in viral immunology and vaccines when the connection between HPV and H&N cancer was discovered there, leading him to pursue the study of immune escape – why a virus is able to evade the immune system and cause damage to the body. More specifically, Dr. Ferris explains, “If you can understand the mechanism of the virus, how it manages to evade the immune system, then you can develop immunotherapies to reorient the immune system and stimulate the right parts such that it recognizes and eliminates the virus.” The concept of immunotherapy is relatively new to the medical field but has already seen success in the FDA approval of two cancer treatments.

Immunotherapies for the treatment of HPV+ H&N cancer would greatly improve the success rates and overall quality of life for those afflicted. “We take for granted the amazing complexities of this muscle,” says Dr. Ferris, “aggressive cancer treatments leave permanent and irreversible damage to the throat, that a viral targeted therapy would not.” In order to move forward in the development of an HPV immunotherapy, Dr. Ferris and his team are working to identify a subset of the population as “at risk,” to develop a screening program for that group, and to build clinical trials testing treatments.

Support from foundations such as The Eye and Ear Foundation is critical to the success of studies such as this. Funding in the early stages can be difficult due to the somewhat “high risk” nature of the project, however the results are far more “high reward.” The success of Dr. Ferris’ research relies heavily upon a cross disciplinary endeavor of epidemiologists, molecular biologists and immunologists, a large scale public health screening, and clinical trials. It is in a large part due to the support and infrastructure provided by foundations that studies such as this are initiated and thus meaningful advancements can be made to the field of medicine and science.

If you are interested in supporting Dr. Ferris’ research please contact the EEF or find us online at www.eyeandear.org.

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Above: Dr. Robert Ferris, MD, PhD, FACS

Dr. Schuman Receives Highly Prestigious Portuguese Award

by Zack Butovich

On September 14, 2012, Dr. Joel S. Schuman, Director UPMC Eye Center, and Chair of the Department of Ophthalmology, was awarded a 1 million euro prize from the Champalimaud Foundation in Lisbon, Portugal. The Champalimaud Vision Award was established in 2007 and is given annually to groups that contribute to overall vision research or to the alleviation of visual problems, with a focus on work in developing countries.

Dr. Schuman, along with James G. Fujimoto, PhD (MIT), David Huang, MD (Casey Eye Institute, Oregon Health and Science University), Carmen A. Puliafito, MD (Keck School of Medicine, USC), Eric A. Swanson (MIT), and David R. Williams (Univ. of Rochester), received the Champalimaud Vision Award for their work in creating and developing the Optical Coherence Tomography (OCT) technology that revolutionized ocular mapping by providing a quick and noninvasive 3D map of a patient's eye, with a particular focus on the retina.

OCT allows physicians to monitor their patients' eyes, effectively track any changes in apparent diseases and conditions, including macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy, and glaucoma, and accurately diagnose new problems as they arise. The Champalimaud Foundation recognized the



group as having "developed groundbreaking techniques for visualizing retinas and uncovering important details about the structure of eyes. Their findings are vital for the diagnosis and treatment of blinding diseases and research into visual functions."

Dr. Schuman and his team have been working on OCT technology for over 20 years, and it has now effectively become standard procedure in eye care clinics all over the world. "I'm delighted by the Champalimaud Foundation's recognition of our efforts," he said in a news release. "We continue to work on improving OCT, and in the next decade it could be as portable and easy to use as a standard ophthalmoscope." **S+S**

Ask The Experts Events

The Eye & Ear Foundation has started a new annual program, called "Ask the Experts!" featuring two panel-style discussions, one showcasing our ophthalmology experts, and the other showcasing our otolaryngology experts. The events were hosted by Mrs. Violet Soffer on May 22, 2012 as part of the annual Soffer Memorial Lecture, and by Mr. and Mrs. Steven and Marian Mosites on September 24, 2012. The Soffer Event was moderated by Ophthalmology Chair Dr. Joel Schuman and guests Drs. Deepinder Dhaliwal, Andrew Eller, and Kim Miller. The Mosites Event was moderated by Otolaryngology Chair Dr. Jonas Johnson and guests Drs. Barry Hirsch, Catherine Palmer, Karl Kandler, Clark Rosen, Jackie Gartner-Schmidt, and Robert Ferris. **S+S**



Dr. Joel Schuman and Dr. Deepinder Dhaliwal on Stage, Beginning the First Part of the Program



Dr. Jonas Johnson with the Otolaryngology Experts Panel

Sino-Nasal and Allergy Center Receives New Name

On June 28th, 2012, the Department of Otolaryngology and Ear, Nose, and Throat Specialists at UPMC hosted a surprise event to officially dedicate the Dr. Berrilyn J. Ferguson Sino-Nasal and Allergy Center, located in UPMC Mercy Hospital, in honor of Dr. Ferguson and her extraordinary efforts and advances in the field of sino-nasal disorders and allergies. As described by department chair Dr. Jonas Johnson,

"BJ Ferguson has been a champion for subspecialty care of patients with sino-nasal and allergic problems. Through her efforts the citizens of western Penn are now afforded access to one of the finest facilities in the world for care of the nose and sinuses." The event was attended by faculty and staff of the Department of Otolaryngology and Ear, Nose, and Throat Specialists of UPMC, as well as by Dr. Ferguson's family and friends. **S+S**



Dr. Berrilyn Ferguson, MD, FACS, FAAOA, and Dr. Eugene Myers, MD, FACS, FRCS Edin (Hon)

The E. Ronald Salvitti Chair Brings in New Director for Retinal Research

by Zack Butovich

A few years ago, Dr. E. Ronald Salvitti was featured in a *Sight + Sound* article for his generous donation of \$1.5 million to establish the E. Ronald Salvitti, MD Chair in Ophthalmology Research. The plan at that time was to create the chair using this source of funding and to recruit an outstanding faculty member to conduct research in retinal regeneration. As Dr. Salvitti put it, "My gift will provide stability and flexibility and allow a faculty member to pursue innovative teaching, clinical and scientific activities for which other funding sources are not available...I have always had a keen interest in education and research and believe the best way to advance patient care is by investing in the future of my specialty. Endowing a chair in ophthalmology research was the best way to accomplish this goal."



Dr. Igor Nasonkin, PhD, and Dr. E. Ronald Salvitti, MD

The UPMC Eye Center and Department of Ophthalmology at the University of Pittsburgh, as well as Chair of the Department, Dr. Joel S. Schuman, are proud to announce that the E. Ronald Salvitti MD, Chair in Ophthalmology Research has been filled by Igor Nasonkin, PhD. Finding the perfect researcher for this position was challenging, and although it took some time, we feel Dr. Nasonkin is the exact fit we were looking for, and brings the perfect combination of translational and basic research focused on retinal repair.

Dr. Nasonkin began his studies at St. Petersburg University in Russia, graduating with a BS in molecular biology and biochemistry. According to Dr. Nasonkin, "the kind of science we were doing at the time was very translational, new and also fascinating." Eventually, this led him to the lab of Dr. Savio Woo at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, TX, where he specialized in retroviral gene transfer and gene therapy, eventually publishing a groundbreaking paper in 1998. From there, he moved to the University of Michigan for his doctoral research in developmental biology and embryology. Finally, Dr. Nasonkin completed his postdoctoral research in embryology and nuclear transfer (cloning) at MIT and Johns Hopkins University.

"It is sad indeed that the most you can do to help a person with vision loss is frequently very little or nothing at all..." says Dr. Nasonkin. And it is this unfortunate fact that drives him to make a difference. "I always wanted this feeling," he says, "to be able to say that because of this and that experiment we did, some patients could receive a new treatment, which actually made a difference in their lives."

Prior to Dr. Nasonkin's arrival, the growing Louis J. Fox Center for Vision Restoration was lacking in a research department for retinal regeneration. As previous *Sight + Sound* articles have described, we have amazing work being done in glaucoma research, cornea repair, and sensory substitution, but we needed a boost in translational retinal repair approaches to be competitive with the best ophthalmology centers like Harvard University. As the Assistant Director of the Louis J. Fox Center for Vision Restoration and the Salvitti Chair in Ophthalmology Research, Dr. Nasonkin will bring a new direction and laser-like focus on the retina and retinal diseases. In so doing, his primary goal at the Fox Center is to form a nuclear

multidisciplinary team of translational scientists, basic scientists and clinicians to collaborate on retinal stem cell therapies. This is a large step towards the overall goal of restoring sight to those who have lost it from the variety of impairing retinal diseases.

However, Dr. Nasonkin acknowledges that new research takes time, saying, "we must move steadily, but one step at a time, observing the main principle of medicine *primum non nocere* (first, do not harm)." Therefore, the first step towards effective vision restoration is a preventative approach. Dr. Nasonkin predicts, "Collectively, if we are talking about slowing down the progression of vision loss, the timing of therapeutic intervention is crucial, and genomics will help us to predict this in 5-10 years, making such therapies a success."

For more on Dr. Nasonkin and research being done at the Fox Center, find us at www.foxcenter.pitt.edu, or www.eyecandear.org.

The Eye & Ear Foundation has Moved!

We have moved to a new office with new phone numbers and a new address:

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Give us a call or stop by to say hello!

Charitable Gift Cards Make Great Gifts

Your gift in a loved one's name can help fund research at the Eye and Ear Institute to improve the lives of people with disorders and diseases of the eye, ear, nose, throat, head, and neck. Visit eyeandear.org today for

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Founder of Viacom Supports Training Center for Skull Base Surgery

by Zack Butovich

We want to be able to teach the upcoming generation of surgeons the [endoscopic endonasal approach (EEA)] so it can spread in its usage, in order for surgeons to be able to provide less invasive, more effective head and neck surgeries for their patients.

In our last edition, we told you about Conor McKiernan, an 11 year old boy from California, and the 2,500 mile journey he and his family made to Pittsburgh to see Dr. Carl Snyderman and Dr. Paul Gardner of the Center for Skull Base Surgery. Drs. Snyderman and Gardner are the world's leading experts in skull base surgery, or the endoscopic endonasal approach (EEA) – a surgical approach to tumors in the back of the throat and base of the skull utilizing the nasal passageway. EEA offers effective surgery with far less intrusion into the body and fewer side effects than is typically experienced through more traditional methods.

As mentioned in the previous article about Conor, Drs. Snyderman and Gardner are currently working with the Eye & Ear Foundation to find support for a newly updated, state-of-the-art training facility where they can help teach the EEA procedure to as many young surgeons worldwide as possible. The EEA is a relatively new procedure, and the University of Pittsburgh is one of very few institutions in the world that performs it. According to Dr. Snyderman and Dr. Gardner, private contributions have the greatest impact if the funds are used to support the education of more specialists. We want to be able to teach the upcoming generation of surgeons the procedure so that others can benefit from endoscopic endonasal surgery. These surgeons will then become the teachers for subsequent generations of surgeons.

To that end, Conor's mother, Jill Schwartz, has been working with the Eye & Ear Foundation to garner support for the training facility in her hometown in southern California. Over the past few months, Jill has reached out to the people that she and Conor know. At the Eye & Ear Foundation, we were impressed by some



Mr. Sumner Redstone

of the gifts that began to trickle in because of Jill's efforts. However, all of Jill's hard work peaked when she began talking to Sumner Redstone, the former head of Viacom.

Sumner Redstone has been an extremely generous philanthropist, having given over a hundred million dollars to various organizations over the years focusing on public health, domestically and abroad, as well as research into cancer, autism, and many other health related problems. In keeping with his generous spirit, Mr. Redstone, through his charitable foundation, donated \$50,000 to the Eye & Ear Foundation to support the beginning of the skull base training center. More support is needed to fully fund the training center but Mr. Redstone's gift is a wonderful start.

The EEF is continuing to receive donations to the Skull Base Training Center. **S+S**

New Retinal Regeneration Lab Offers Hope for Most Common Causes of Blindness

by Zack Butovich

Our primary goal with the Retinal Regeneration and Repair Research Lab will be to create an environment where [the correct utilization of stem cells, cellular therapies, and tissue regeneration approaches, among others,] will be effectively studied, tested, and evaluated.

The retina is the fragile and very sensitive layer of neural tissue that lines the back of the eye and interprets light that comes in from the front of the eye. It then sends a signal to the brain through the optic nerve, allowing us to see. A number of different visually impairing conditions originate with problems in the retina, such as Age-Related Macular Degeneration (AMD), as well as diabetic retinopathy, retinitis pigmentosa, and retina detachment, among many others. Dr. Nasonkin, along with Department Chair Dr. Joel S. Schuman, believes that the correct utilization of stem cells, cellular therapies, and tissue regeneration approaches (including biomaterials) can be the best way to pursue effective, lasting treatments for those suffering retina related disorders. Our primary goal with the retinal regeneration and repair research lab will be to create an environment where these pursuits, among others, will be effectively studied, tested, and evaluated.

The primary research goal of the new Retinal Regeneration Lab at its outset is to investigate ways to artificially grow retinal progenitors (the type of cell that processes signals from the retina to the brain) and find a method to integrate them into an already mature retina and optic nerve in order to restart sending signals to the brain through damaged pathways, thereby restoring vision. This technology and research involves the collaboration of a number of different sciences including genomics, epigenetics, developmental biology, stem cell biology, tissue engineering, and regenerative ophthalmology – creating a cross-disciplinary environment that the Fox Center was specifically designed to foster. Basing its model on the highly successful McGowan Center for Regenerative Medicine – one of the most prominent centers for regenerative medicine in the country – the Fox Center is unique in applying its mission specifically to vision restoration.

Richard Snyder, one of the executors of the Charles and Pearl Family Trust, stated, “Our mother has been dealing with Macular Degeneration for several years and we have seen the negative impact this has had on her quality of life. We made this gift to the Eye & Ear Foundation because we felt the best way to have an impact on this condition is to support the work directly. Our hope is this gift will help speed the progress towards finding better treatments for diseases and disorders of the eye in the future.”

The new Retina Regeneration Lab is a bold step forward in retinal regeneration science. Drs. Nasonkin and Schuman both foresee regenerative ophthalmology medicine providing substantive treatment for those suffering visual impairment in the near future. These types of treatments are badly needed but not yet in clinic. Look for future updates about advancements from the Fox Center and Retinal Regeneration Lab. 

In our 2011 annual report, we mentioned an extremely generous Kittanning couple by the name of Charles and Louella Snyder. Louella is suffering from AMD, a degenerative retinal disease that slowly impairs sight until it is eventually lost. Current treatments involve direct injections to the back of the eye that are repeated as frequently as every few weeks, depending on how advanced the condition has become. Currently, there is no “cure” for AMD, at best some symptoms are simply prolonged.

The Snyders are doing what they can to make an impact on AMD research to help find a cure. Through two gifts from them and the Charles and Pearl Snyder Trust Fund, they are helping to build a base for a new retinal regeneration research lab that will be headed by Dr. Igor Nasonkin.

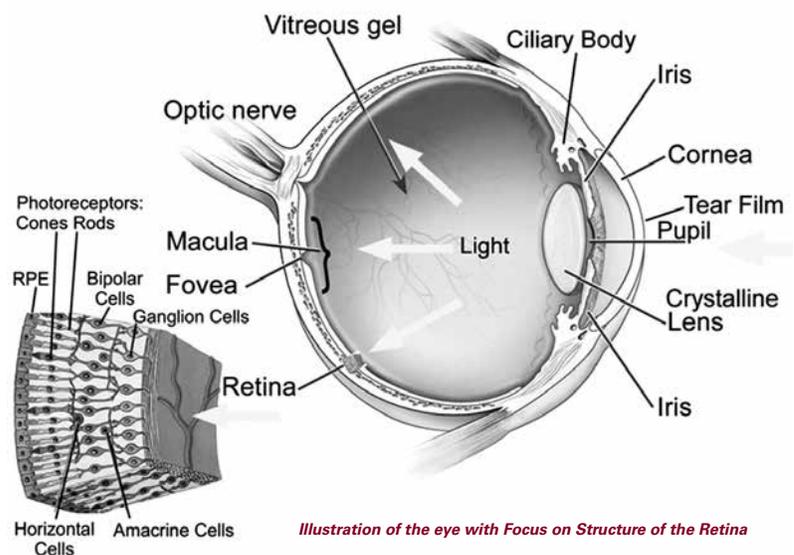


Illustration of the eye with Focus on Structure of the Retina

Dr. Jennifer Grandis, Distinguished Professor

by Virginia Nelson



The Eye and Ear Foundation would like to congratulate Dr. Jennifer Grandis on her recent promotion to Distinguished Professor of Otolaryngology by the University of Pittsburgh.

Though modest about her accomplishments, this honor, the highest of which can be accorded to a member of the professorate, acknowledges the exceptional contributions Dr. Grandis has made to the School of Medicine as well as to the field of otolaryngology and cancer research. Joining a group of only 41 professors to achieve this recognition, and one of 12 women, Dr. Grandis stands out among her peers for a unique approach to otolaryngology and for the significant impact of her work beyond the University of Pittsburgh community. Others in the Department of Otolaryngology who have been named Distinguished Professor include Dr. Eugene N. Myers and Dr. Charles D. Bluestone. Although seeing patients and operating a few days each week, Dr. Grandis' emphasis on research is unusual in comparison to the majority of practice focused otolaryngologists. She accredits, "the specific cancer research conducted and the reports of our findings," for the "broad impact on the scientific and medical community." Her lab consists of an array of scientifically inclined individuals, including high school students, college undergraduates, medical students, PhD/MD students, residents and fellows, all of which feel privileged to work under her guidance. This is "an exciting time to be able to treat patients, train the next generation of doctors and scientists and be recognized by my community for doing impactful research," states Dr. Grandis. Indeed we are grateful for her contributions and proud to call her a member of the Eye and Ear Foundation. **S+S**

Research Pays Off for Sufferers of Shingles

by Zack Butovich

Dr. Paul "Kip" Kinchington came to the University of Pittsburgh in 1991 to work in the Department of Ophthalmology and UPMC Eye Center at the the Eye and Ear Institute. Currently, Dr. Kinchington heads an NIH funded study focusing on varicella zoster virus (VZV), the virus that causes chickenpox and the painful disease shingles. Dr. Kinchington has developed some pretty exciting results in treating the pain associated with shingles and even some strategies that may prevent the disease altogether.

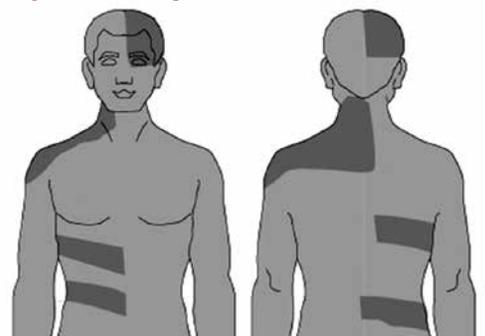
Typically, VZV infects a child with chickenpox early in life, and then recedes into the body along the sensory nervous system to lie dormant in cells near our spine. Decades later, the virus may reactivate and infect the skin again, traveling back to the skin along the same nerve cells, and manifesting itself in the form of shingles. While chickenpox can vary in severity, it usually does not cause more than some minor discomfort. Shingles, on the other hand, is a debilitating and nearly always painful condition, and it can trigger longer lasting severe pain where the skin becomes super sensitive and exceedingly painful to physical touch. The most common location for shingles to develop is on the trunk of the body, but it is followed closely by shingles on the head and face, which often leads to infection in the eye and eye disease.

Approximately 90-95% of adults over the age of 25-30 had chickenpox as children, and therefore have a dormant form of VZV in their nervous system and could get shingles. Nearly a fifth of those will get the condition at some point in their life, usually closer to their twilight years and older. Of that group, about 25% will get it on the head and in the eye. Overall, there are between a quarter million and half million cases in the U.S. per year of shingles.

Shingles is associated with a host of diseases that affect the eye and vision. In addition to the excruciating pain, shingles can cause the cornea to go totally numb, leading to incidental damage because of the lack of sensation. The virus may trigger a clear cornea to go partially opaque, reducing vision or cause muscle spasms in the eye, as well as tics, paralysis and other neurological problems. In rare cases, VZV can devastate the retina and cause near total blindness.

The goal of Dr. Kinchington's research is to find better ways to prevent the pain associated with shingles, and eventually to prevent the disease altogether. Current research in his lab shows that when utilizing specific antiviral strains, the touch hypersensitivity in animal models can be assuaged to some degree. Dr. Kinchington is working to, first, dissect the various specific viral genes that make the virus so painful to those infected, and secondly to find new treatments. He has recently found a way to deliver and release enkephalin, a type of endorphin that reduces pain in the neurons infected by VZV that totally block the pain signals. Though still in its basic research phase, current results suggest it has very promising signs for the alleviation of pain in those suffering from shingles.

For more information and future updates, find us online at www.eyeandear.org.



The Most Common Locations for Shingles Infections. Head and Facial Shingles Often Leads to Ocular Infection.

Grateful Patient Dedicated to Supporting Surgeon's Research

by Zack Butovich



Dante and His Two Sons, Ari and Elias

Dante Plutko is a business insurance and finance consultant, and first began his relationship with UPMC Ear, Nose, and Throat specialists about a year and half ago. At the time, he was visiting Dr. Dohar, a pediatric otolaryngologist at Children's Hospital, for his younger son whom they thought may need to have tubes placed in his ears. During the exam, Dante's son became uncomfortable, and refused to let Dr. Dohar use an otoscope in his ear. "Let me look in Dad's ear," Dr. Dohar said, to ease the tension, and proceeded to examine Dante's ear canal. Surprisingly, Dr. Dohar quickly and seriously said to Dante, "you need to get this checked out."

Sometime later, Dante went in for an examination with an ENT physician near his home. He received a complete evaluation, including scans and was told he would receive the results soon. Six weeks passed with no follow up, and Dante started to become nervous. Diving into some research, he wanted to find another physician for another opinion. On another visit to Dr. Dohar for his son, Dante asked for his help. Dr. Dohar suggested UPMC Ear, Nose, and Throat Specialists. This advice eventually led him to Dr. Andrew McCall, a specialist in otology, neurotology, and other inner ear conditions and disorders.

Dr. McCall completed his otology/neurotology fellowship at Harvard Medical School, in the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary in Boston. Having come to UPMC recently, Dr. McCall has begun new research projects with the ultimate goal of improving recovery of vestibular (balance) functions following surgery or injury to the vestibular system. Dr. McCall's research involves studying the mechanisms with which the process of balance recovery normally takes place and seeking to identify strategies to improve recovery when the normal recovery process does not function properly.

In addition to a research interest in balance functions, Dr. McCall is a talented ear surgeon. After a complete examination and some scans of Dante, he recognized the presence of cholesteatoma, a invasive skin growth within the ear. It was around the same time as Dr. McCall's diagnosis that Dante's first physician got back in touch, identifying the same diagnosis, and suggesting that the only surgical treatment would involve a full removal of the eardrum, resulting in a total loss of hearing, and the necessary implantation of a hearing device. Dr. McCall disagreed with this assessment, and suggested an operation that would not be as invasive and would likely lead to better hearing result. Ultimately, Dante trusted Dr. McCall, who performed a procedure called a tympanoplasty, which involves making an incision behind the ear, removing the cholesteatoma, and clearing the middle ear.

Following the surgery, Dante did have some hearing loss, but was assured by Dr. McCall that his hearing would improve over time. This September marks the target healing time since the surgery and now Dante's wife jokes his hearing is now better that it was before. Dante was so pleased by this result that he has now offered to help the Eye & Ear Foundation bring in financial support to establish a new fund for Dr. McCall's research. In addition to his personal support, Dante is circulating a letter to people he knows, that describes why independent support for research is so crucial for the advancement of medicine and healthcare.

Check back to the Eye & Ear Foundation website (www.eyeandear.org) for more details about our work with Dante and Dr. McCall.



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Letter from the Executive Director



Lawton Snyder

There are many different forms of planned giving, from simple bequests, to more complicated trust agreements, all of which are designed to best meet your goals and individual situation. Should you wish to discuss or learn more about Planned Giving, please call 412-864-1300.

Dear Friends,

Advances in science which lead to new discoveries – this has been the key component of the mission for the Eye & Ear Foundation since it was founded in 1985. Recently we have had several examples where major discoveries have been made in research in the departments of Ophthalmology and Otolaryngology at the University of Pittsburgh which are on the path to new treatments or possible cures for various conditions. Specifically, there has been exciting research that has brought us closer to a treatment for tinnitus (ringing in the ears) or a way to use stem cells to repair tissues in the eye and cure glaucoma, just to name a few. With each of these advances in science there is a story that includes hardworking, dedicated people and the right amount of support at the right time. Every story is fascinating – which is why we provide you with *Sight + Sound*. If you would like to read more you can find every edition of *Sight + Sound* on our website at www.eyeandear.org. If you would like more information about specific projects you can give us a call at 412-864-1300 or stop by our new office in Suite 251, in the Eye and Ear Institute building in Oakland.

Lawton Snyder
Executive Director
The Eye & Ear Foundation of Pittsburgh