

Ophthalmology at the University of Alberta: Over 8 Decades of People-driven Contributions

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ABSTRACT •

The Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences at the University of Alberta has a long history of dedication to outstanding patient-centered eye care for a population of over 3 million, many of whom reside in geographically remote areas. It was established as the Department of Ophthalmology and Rhino-Oto-Laryngology in 1937. By 1946, Dr. Mark Marshall had become director of graduate medical education at the University of Alberta and established the “Marshall Plan”, which led to the development of several residency programs, including ophthalmology, at the University of Alberta. Some ophthalmology residents made extraordinary contributions while still in training while many others obtained valuable training elsewhere, and then returned to serve the Department.

Historical discoveries and developments highlighted in this article captured through research, oral and written interviews, include excellence and innovation in the following areas: education for a variety of learners, patient care locally and in underserved areas regionally and globally, translational vision science research, and leadership including the consolidation of the ophthalmology program at the Royal Alexandra Hospital in 1996, and the launch of the Eye Institute of Alberta identity in 2015. The Department aims to continue its commitment to enhance vision-related quality of life for Canadians and others by maintaining its culture of collegiality and collaboration, continuing to invest in talent and garner philanthropic support, and by further strengthening its institutional foundations and enabling environment.

With a vision to lead patient-centred eye care through outstanding and integrated service, education, and research, the Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences at the University of Alberta (referred to hereafter as the Department) serves over 3 million people residing in Edmonton, Northern Alberta, Northeastern British Columbia, Yukon Territory, Northwest Territories, and Northwestern Saskatchewan. Based on a recent celebration of the Department’s 80th anniversary and research conducted by a historian (including archived and printed sources in addition to oral and written interviews), we have captured key people-driven contributions in education, patient care, research, and leadership, which we hope will be motivational and educational for learners, ophthalmologists, vision scientists, and leaders in the eye care field.

EVOLUTION OF THE DEPARTMENT

The history of ophthalmology at the University of Alberta dates back to 1923, when the Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry began offering ophthalmology courses to medical students. In 1931, as interest in the field continued to grow, the university listed ophthalmology as a subdepartment in the Department of Surgery and Clinical Surgery. Shortly after, in 1937, the Department of Ophthalmology and Rhino-Oto-Laryngology was established. The Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of

Canada officially approved a 4-year postgraduate program for ophthalmology at the University of Alberta in 1949. During the first years of the program, University of Alberta residents often left the province to undertake a year or 2 of specialized training at institutions in the United States. After training, many of these residents returned to the province and played key roles in the development of the University of Alberta Hospital’s full residency training program in ophthalmology. The advanced skills that these former residents brought back with them allowed the Department to complete all residency training locally within a decade. The Department grew slowly during the 20th century, gaining minor procedure and outpatient operating rooms in the University of Alberta Hospital.

Adult eye care in Alberta was restructured in the 1990s. As a response to budget deficits, the Progressive Conservative government began planning the regionalization of health care in the province. Discussions on the process of regionalizing ophthalmology began under the leadership of Dr. Henry Wyatt and came to completion under Dr. Ian MacDonald, with contributions from several other ophthalmologists, including Drs. Royce Johnson, Fooklin Leong-Sit, and William “Bill” Pearce. In 1993, a motion to regionalize all adult hospital-based ophthalmology at the Royal Alexandra Hospital (RAH) was officially adopted. In 1996, the Regional Eye Centre officially opened at the RAH.

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Additional sites include the children's hospital, now called the Stollery Children's Hospital, within the University of Alberta Hospital; Westview Health Center, located in Stony Plain, Alberta; and the Fort Saskatchewan Community Hospital. The regionalization of adult eye care marked a major turning point in the development of the Department because it brought all Edmonton-area ophthalmologists under the umbrella of the Department, which greatly expanded the number of clinical faculty and consolidated all adult ophthalmology care at the RAH. It established a commitment to teaching and unified ophthalmologists, with dedicated operating rooms, inpatient beds, specialized clinics, and Department office space. Pediatric ophthalmology remained at the children's hospital within the University of Alberta. In October 2015, the Regional Eye Centre was renamed the Eye Institute of Alberta with a renewed commitment to strengthening patient care, education, and research.

EDUCATION: INVESTING IN OUR FUTURE

The Department is committed to excellence in teaching at all levels, including undergraduate medical education, residency training, graduate and postdoctoral training, and clinical as well as research fellowships. Students work closely with ophthalmologists across Edmonton to gain the knowledge and diverse set of skills necessary to provide the highest quality of care to patients. This devotion to quality education began with Dr. Mark Marshall, who enrolled as a medical student at the University of Alberta in 1920. As a fifth-year medical student in 1925, Dr. Marshall earned a class I grade in ophthalmology and rhino-oto-laryngology. Marshall completed his medical training at McGill University and, after receiving his Diploma in Laryngology and Otology in London, as well as additional training in Vienna, Paris, and New York, Dr. Marshall returned to the University of Alberta as a demonstrator in ophthalmology in 1931. He rose through the ranks to become clinical professor of ophthalmology and rhino-oto-laryngology and head of the Department of Ophthalmology and Rhino-Oto-Laryngology in 1940. In 1946, Marshall became the director of graduate medical education at the University of Alberta. During his time as director, he developed and implemented the graduate medical training program, which became known informally as the "Marshall Plan."¹ This training program laid the foundation for ophthalmology residency training at the University of Alberta.

Dr. Don Hassard, who was among many residents who successfully completed Dr. Marshall's training program, performed the first corneal transplant in Western Canada at the University of Alberta Hospital in 1962. After undertaking a fellowship in corneal surgery, Dr. Hassard returned to Edmonton in 1965 and went on to establish the Eye Bank and Corneal Transplant Service. Shortly

thereafter, Dr. Rod Morgan, another former resident, returned to the Department of Ophthalmology and became the director and principal instructor of the University of Alberta Hospital Orthoptic Training Program.

Continuing through the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, early advancements of modern cataract surgery and microsurgery were offered to the public and as part of resident training. Several members contributed significantly to establish the Department as a leader in training modern cataract, strabismus, and glaucoma surgeons, who filled the prairies and British Columbia over the years to come. Dr. Jack Rootman, a graduate of the University of Alberta Ophthalmology Residency Program in 1972, went on to become an outstanding orbital surgeon and ophthalmic pathologist, educator, researcher and chair of the Department of Ophthalmology at the University of British Columbia. He received the Canadian Ophthalmological Society Lifetime Achievement Award in 2011.

In the 21st century, educational advancements have transcended borders and cultures through the introduction of numerous capacity-building programs in Africa and India led by several members of the Department, including Drs. Matt Tennant and Mark Greve. The "sandwich fellowship" program was developed by Dr. Karim Damji and colleagues at the University of Ottawa and was also implemented at the University of Alberta. This program involves a fellow from a developing nation who completes rotations in an academic institution in the developed world as well as his or her home nation. Also included in the experience is an emphasis on teaching, leadership, management, and research. The purpose of the endeavour is to train highly skilled clinicians, develop various subspecialty areas, and expand institutional capacity in the fellow's home nation.² Through this and a traditional fellowship training model, the Department trains international fellows in a number of subspecialties.

The Department has always sought to provide exceptional educational opportunities to residents and clinicians, from the development of the Department's first surgical teaching laboratory in 1977–1978 to the recent development of the Ophthalmic Surgical Skills Center led by Dr. Morley Kutzner in 2014. This surgical simulation centre enables students and surgeons to develop and refine their techniques with state-of-the-art surgical equipment.

Since the first resident, Dr. J. Winston Duggan, graduated from the residency program in 1950, 116 ophthalmologists have graduated; many have stayed in Edmonton for some or all of their careers, including Dr. Duggan, who would go on to become head of the Division of Ophthalmology from 1960 to 1964. A number of others have returned after additional training, bringing back their expertise in areas such as glaucoma, pediatrics, plastics, cornea, retina, and neuro-ophthalmology.

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