

# **Why Ophthalmology?**

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## Why Ophthalmology?

# 12 Reasons Why Medical Students Choose to Pursue a Career in Ophthalmology

In a survey of over 100 U.S. third- and fourth-year medical students, researchers sought to determine the motivations to pursue a career in ophthalmology. The top 12 factors listed as the most important reason are presented below in descending order. The percentage of responses listing the factor as most important is also included.

**1** Helping people see better (35.6%). The authors wrote that “the leading response was the importance that vision plays in one’s life and specifically the ability to help people see better compared with other aspects of health.”

**2** Hours worked (14.4%)

**3** Performing surgery (14.4%)

**4** Technology (11.5%)

**5** Junior-year medical school ophthalmology rotation (6.7%)

**6** Previous exposure (except medical school rotations) (4.8%)

**7** Family member in the field (1.9%)

**8** History of ocular disease (1.9%)

**9** Salary (1.0%)

**10** Status (1.0%)

**11** Rare “life and death” issues (1.0%)

**12** Contact with patients of all ages (1.0%)

From Nissman S, Kudrick N, Piccone M. Motivations and perceptions of US medical students pursuing a career in ophthalmology. *Ann Ophthalmol* 2002; 34 (3): 223-9.

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# 7 Reasons Why Ophthalmology Residents Chose To Become Ophthalmologists

In a survey of over 700 ophthalmology residents, residents were asked to provide reasons for entering the field. Residents also ranked factors based on their effect on choosing ophthalmology as a career (1 = large effect, 5 = no effect). The findings are presented below in descending order along with mean scores.

**1** Surgery (1.49)

**2** Patient contact (1.83)

**3** Lifestyle (2.17)

**4** Junior/senior electives (2.24)

**5** Previous contact with ophthalmologists (2.54). Approximately 10% of residents had a family member or relative in the specialty. Nearly 60% were patients of ophthalmologists before becoming residents. The authors wrote that some residents had “visual problems in childhood that resulted in close contact with an ophthalmologist while growing up, and that greatly influences their interest in ophthalmology.”

**6** Potential income (3.03)

**7** Status among peers (3.49)

Among the other interesting findings from the study were that:

- 32% had hobbies or interests that they felt would make them successful in ophthalmology. These generally involved the use of fine motor skills or hand-eye coordination, and included such hobbies as jewelry, crafting, woodwork, carving, calligraphy, music, sewing, sculpture, and sports. Approximately 5% reported an interest in photography.
- Other reasons cited for pursuing ophthalmology as a career included the ability to treat patients both medically and surgically, high patient satisfaction, contact with patients of all ages, and formation of relationships with patients over a long period of time.
- Several respondents reported that ophthalmology interested them because of the opportunities to work abroad in areas of great need.

From Pankratz M, Helveston E. Ophthalmology. The resident’s perspective. *Arch Ophthalmol* 1992; 110 (1): 37-43.

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# 39 Ophthalmologists Offer Reasons Why They Chose to Enter the Specialty

## 1

As a medical student starting out, I never in a million years thought I would like Ophthalmology. I was interested in internal medicine and its subspecialties. I had the option of doing an ophthalmology rotation during my third year. The moment I saw the nerve and retina through the 90D lens at the slit lamp, I fell in love with exam. I started to discover other things about the field during my rotation that really seemed to fit me well. I love working with my hands and am detail-oriented, so I really enjoyed the surgeries. Unlike other surgical specialties, you still develop long-term relationships with your patients, which really appealed to me. Ophtho is this rare blend of specialized and general practice that combines surgical and medical care - you really can't find such a balance in many other fields. I absolutely love it.<sup>1</sup>

Neda Esmaili, M.D.

## 2

I had been accepted for a residency in internal medicine and was working on my PhD in immunogenetics. While at the Department of Internal Medicine, I had to do funduscopies on patients with leukemia — and realized that looking at eyes was fantastic. I had previously stayed away from ophthalmology as that was too obvious a choice, with my father and two cousins being eye doctors.<sup>2</sup>

Martine Jager, MD, PhD

## 3

When I was 11, I was hit in the eye with a dirtball. This experience enabled me to observe, from the patient's viewpoint, how important eyes are and how important the need for reconstructing them is. Over the years, I had many opportunities to observe professional eye care in action. A well-known family friend was the head of Wills Eye Hospital, and this presented me with numerous chances to learn about how the eyes function and what happens when things go wrong. Another contributing factor to my choice of a specialty occurred when I was in medical school. I got the opportunity on a medical rotation to do ophthalmology at the same time as internal medicine. This provided a good comparison, and I found ophthalmology to be more interesting. Even subtle things seemed to sway me towards ophthalmology. The ophthalmologists seemed more interested in their work and encouraged us to take part in everything, whereas the medical residents never let us present to the chief. Ophthalmology became fascinating to me. When I look inside the eye, I see something interesting all the time. An ophthalmologist can go

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anywhere in the world and, in 20 minutes, make a diagnosis with a few simple instruments. It seems a lot more self-contained than many of the other specialties. The only reason I didn't come to ophthalmology sooner was that, somehow, early on I had gotten it into my head that an ophthalmologist wasn't a "complete" doctor. When I entered medical school, that was the only thing that held me back from ophthalmology. But I soon learned that ophthalmologists can visualize the whole person. The eyes don't get sick by themselves. The whole body is involved. Likewise, they don't heal without the body healing. The eyes are the headlights of the body. Their surveillance is not only of the world around us, but also the world inside us. You can look into the eyes and see anemia, you can see liver trouble, you can see the effects of high blood pressure, thyroid, diabetes, etc. In a sense, therefore, examining the eye is a little like looking through a window of the body; with other body parts, you don't gain the same kinds of insight.<sup>3</sup>

Robert Abel, Jr., M.D.

## 4

When I was in my clinical year at the medical school, I saw my ophthalmology teacher managing cataract cases and was excited. What astonished me was that patients were blind today and then tomorrow they were able to see. It was completely amazing. I saw that and said, "I think this must be my area of interest, to study ophthalmology."<sup>4</sup>

Dr. Kefyalew

## 5

I can think of no other specialty that is more interesting, diverse and rewarding. There are patients that I can treat medically while others need surgery. Which other specialty in medicine allows one to look at the pathology specimen without having to dissect the part out? It is aptly said that 'the eye is the window to the body!'<sup>5</sup>

## 6

The surgical aspect is the most thrilling and varied. One might ask how much is there to do in an eye? Believe it or not one has the option to subspecialize in cornea, glaucoma, medical retina, vitreo-retinal surgery and pediatrics. If you are into gadgetry and advanced technology – look no further than ophthalmology. There is an ever increasing array of diagnostic and surgical instruments at your disposal. I'd give a special mention to oculoplastic surgery as that is my subspecialty interest encompassing almost every tissue around the eye and every age group. The orbital work reminds me of my first aspiration to work with bones!<sup>5</sup>

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### 7

If anyone is looking for career guidance I would say if you have a passion for surgery, technology, like attention to detail, have good manual dexterity, binocular vision and want to make a difference to a patient's life, ophthalmology would top the charts!<sup>5</sup>

### 8

I enjoy ophthalmology because it is a good mixture of medicine and surgical procedures. Additionally, the patients greatly benefit from their treatments. Their good vision is my greatest reward. I deal a lot with pediatric cataracts, and was drawn to this subspecialty because these children are especially helpless. They are, however, also the best patients to work with, as a successful surgery will grant them good postoperative vision—an extremely valuable gift for patients who have their whole lives ahead of them.<sup>6</sup>

Charlotta Zetterström, MD, PhD

### 9

In the sixth grade at my school in Iran they taught us about the senses in our biology class: hearing, vision, touch, taste, and smell. I was very curious about the eyes and ears, I drew them all the time, I decided to study more about them. While I was in high school, I worked as a volunteer at a clinic in the afternoons because I wanted to be a doctor. I loved to help people and saw that doctors have a good life and helped their community,” says the doctor. So he decided to study medicine and enrolled at UCI, during his first year he volunteered at the clinic. “At first they gave me office work but I told them I preferred working with the doctors and their patients. I had a very good relationship with them and they appreciated my help so they put me to work as a technical assistant. I saw how the patients arrived with deplorable vision, they couldn't read, they couldn't drive, they were operated on and, boom! The following day they could see perfectly. I saw how the patients hugged the doctor, so appreciative, I loved their gratitude. I was convinced I too wanted to be a doctor.<sup>7</sup>

Dr. Ramin Tayani

### 10

I had considered several different specialties. I specifically looked at fields that were progressive, medically interesting, and surgical in nature and that involved pharmacology as well as mathematics and engineering. I actually thought I would be a neurosurgeon, but I was discouraged by the grim outcomes for many of the patients. I happened to be working on neuroophthalmological physiology when I decided that ophthalmology would be a good field for me, and I subsequently received a recommendation to go to the Wilmer Eye Institute at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. Ophthalmology was a perfect fit, and I found that patients' outcomes appeared to be better than in any other field of medicine. The concept that performing cataract surgery could dramatically change people's lives became very important to me.<sup>8</sup>

James Gills, MD

## Why Ophthalmology?

### 11

When I was in second grade, I began to have school phobia. I can still remember being terrified to go to school. Someone suggested I get my eyes tested, and a myopic pair of spectacles later, I was a happy second grader again! I do not remember seeing many other doctors, but I remember seeing my ophthalmologist yearly. Richard Hesse, MD, the chairman of the Department of Ophthalmology at Ochsner Medical Center in New Orleans, impressed me and always encouraged my interest in medicine. It was a combination of this life-changing second-grade event, Dr. Hesse, and the endless support of my mom and dad that inspired me to become an ophthalmologist. I knew before the first day of medical school what my specialty was going to be.<sup>9</sup>

William Lahners, MD

### 12

Although no one else in my family was in the medical profession, I had great support from them to go to medical school. I also had a role model, a female ophthalmologist, who was one of the many surgeons I assisted in surgery during my summer job in college and medical school. Although not a nurse, my role was a *scrub nurse* at the time, and I had been trained to assist surgeons. This particular ophthalmologist told me that the field was very rewarding and how gratifying it is to help people improve their vision. I think a combination of all those things led me to go both into medicine and ophthalmology.<sup>10</sup>

Johanna Seddon, MD

### 13

Great combination of both medical and surgical aspects with ‘treatability’ of many ophthalmologic conditions. Dynamic field with constant incorporation of innovative technology in both diagnostics and management. Combination of medical and surgical treatments in helping patients with eye problems, of which there is no shortage. Personally rewarding in helping patient maintain and even improve quality of life – people value their vision. Many opportunities to apply training in international settings and developing world.<sup>11</sup>

University of Alberta

### 14

Graduating in the top 5% of my medical school class allowed me to have many options. I chose ophthalmology as a specialty and retina as a subspecialty because of the importance of the gift of vision to patients and the ability to restore it and see such an impact on the patient's life.<sup>12</sup>

Rick Isernhagen, MD

## Why Ophthalmology?

### 15

Ophthalmology appealed to me because it gives you the opportunity to work with patients of all ages, from premature infants to 100+ in years. (My oldest cataract surgery patient was 104.5 years old!) As a glaucoma specialist and cataract surgeon, I work with a lot of senior citizens. They are wonderful patients, and I look forward to my work every day.<sup>13</sup>

Siv Brit Saetre, M.D.

### 16

My father was an ophthalmologist, so I was exposed to the field early in my life. The surgeries in ophthalmology are technologically advanced and very successful. It's really amazing to be able to improve someone's vision so quickly, and to make such a significant difference in their lives.<sup>14</sup>

Prit Oat Sinchai, MD

### 17

I have always been fascinated by eyes and the way that biology and physics work in unison to produce sight. The complexity of the visual system and the importance of sight in our lives have maintained and continue to maintain my interest.<sup>15</sup>

Dr. Tim Lavy

### 18

Ophthalmology actually chose me. During my elective surgery rotation in medical school, I was planning to take an ear, nose, and throat (ENT) elective, but it was full. Ophthalmology was the only elective still open, so I took that instead. Once I spent some time in the department assisting in surgery, playing with the instruments and cool lasers, and seeing how happy patients were to have their vision restored, I was sold. There is an ENT practice next to my office, and every day that I go into work, I am reminded of how lucky I was that the ENT rotation was full.<sup>16</sup>

Mark Kontos, MD



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### 19

My decision to become an ophthalmologist was last minute and spurred by a life-altering event. After 4 years of studying neurosurgery in medical school, I was forced to suspend my education because of a tragic skydiving accident. During my jump, I had problems with my parachute. It took me 6 months to be able to walk again and a total of 3 years to fully recover from my injuries. When I returned to my studies after several months, I realized that the outcomes of neurosurgery were a bit disappointing to me, despite the fact that I found the surgical procedure in and of itself to be very rewarding. Still, I did not like that many patients experienced residual problems postoperatively. With my new perspective, I considered becoming an ophthalmologist. I had tried my hand at some of the procedures and discovered that the surgery was fantastic and the patients' outcomes were amazing. When the time came to pick my specialty, I drew to choose third out of 20,000 residents, leaving me very little time to second-guess my decision. After the first two interns made their decision, it was my turn; I picked ophthalmology and believe that the decision has played out well in my life.<sup>17</sup>

Jose L.Guell, MD, PhD

### 20

I became interested in eye surgery, after my younger brother had an eye injury that required several surgeries. I developed a deep passion and respect for this art, which saved my brother's eye and decided to pursue it as my career. On my journey, I discovered that eye surgery is a multidimensional field with elements of art, science, experience, technology, innovation, devotion and talent. I am forever grateful for the satisfaction, challenges and the perpetual growth that it provides me.<sup>18</sup>

Dr. Ilan Cohen

### 21

I have always been fascinated with "how things work." The transparency of the eye allows us to see how disease changes the eye. When the iris is inflamed, we can actually see the microscopic white blood cells floating in the eye fluid, and this helps us manage the patient. Ophthalmology is one of the few specialties in which the physician can responsibly provide both medical and surgical care. For the rest of medicine, care is often shared. At times the cardiologist needs to work with the cardiovascular surgeon, for example. The ophthalmologist does it all.<sup>19</sup>

Dr. Ira Wong

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### 22

I have a surgeon's mentality. I want to be able to fix problems. Someone comes in unable to see, and I can take out their cataract and make a huge difference in their lives. It's a great feeling going home at the end of the day.<sup>20</sup>

Janice A. Gault, MD

### 23

Ophthalmology provides a combination of medical and surgical work and offers a great deal of job satisfaction: it is particularly rewarding to enable people to see. Much of the pathology in the eye can be visualised, reducing reliance on laboratory tests in order to make a diagnosis. The surgery is delicate and challenging and the discipline itself is high-tech and constantly changing, with opportunities for practitioners to subspecialise or to maintain general interests. I enjoy being able to make a real difference to patients like helping them improve their vision so that they can have a better quality of life.<sup>21</sup>

### 24

The simplified surgical approach to medicine appealed to me as a medical student, in terms of an immediate surgical solution to a medical problem. When I graduated, I already knew that life is not as simple as this. However, I still preferred a surgical field that adds a sense of problem-solving for many of the patients. For me, ophthalmology combines an interesting clinic, sophisticated surgeries and a vast field for research.<sup>22</sup>

Shahar Frenkel, MD, PhD

### 25

I was intrigued by the way the eye could allow you to understand so many other disorders because it was made up of tissues that were found in other parts of the body - it is a sensory organ that has components of the nervous system, a vascularized structure whose blood supply and vessel appearance are representative of the rest of the body's vasculature - which could not be directly observed. I attended the department's morning conference as a medical student in my spare time and each time I became more and more convinced that this was the subspecialty for me, both from a scientific standpoint, humanitarian, and variety of interesting problems.<sup>23</sup>

Dr. Randy Kardon

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I grew-up in Togo, West Africa, at a rural mission hospital that my parents helped start when I was four years old. My dad was a general surgeon and my mom was a nurse. The medical needs I saw were immense. As I pursued a career to help meet that need, I asked several jungle mission surgeons, including my dad, what kind of doctor they would be if they could do it over again. They all independently said they would become ophthalmologists and return to Africa. There is virtually no access to eye care in many parts of Africa, so my dad, a general surgeon, learned to do cataracts and trabs with loops! Even with their 10+ aphakic glasses, my dad said these were the most excited patients he'd ever seen. Helping these grandpas and grandmas see their grandchildren for the first time really touched my dad's heart.<sup>24</sup>

John Cropsey, MD

### 27

My father had a very rare eye condition and for a significant period of time both he and his twin brother were legally blind. Advances in ophthalmology finally provided a treatment and my dad can now see because of successful corneal transplants and several other eye surgeries that were performed here in Boston in the 1980s. It is this background that got me interested in medicine and in particular ophthalmology. My coming to Boston for my training and eventually working at the Joslin to help other people see again is like coming full circle.<sup>25</sup>

Paolo Antonio S. Silva, M.D

### 28

I decided to become an ophthalmologist when I first attended ophthalmology lectures at the University of Santiago de Compostela, Spain. I was impressed by the refinement of the microsurgical techniques. They seemed exquisite to me, especially microsurgical techniques for cataract and corneal surgery. Each delicate surgical step is built on the success of the previous step to achieve an uncomplicated outcome. I was interested in optics, but I also enjoyed infectious and inflammatory diseases. With ophthalmology, I realized I could have a combination of all my interests. Additionally, my work provides me with a great deal of satisfaction, as it has a considerable impact on patients' quality of life. Approximately 80% of the information we receive from our five senses comes through the eyes.<sup>26</sup>

Victoria de Rojas Silva, MD , PhD

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### 29

Before becoming an ophthalmologist I was an army medical officer. I had an uncle who was blinded by cataract when he was in his fifties. My uncle was an educated man living in Freetown and seeing how his blindness impacted on him made me wonder how those living in poverty were affected by blindness. It made me realize how poor eye care was in Sierra Leone and I saw how qualified doctors were not correctly diagnosing something as basic as cataract. This made me decide to specialize in ophthalmology.<sup>27</sup>

Dr. Dennis Williams

### 30

Initially I was planning to do neurology due to my fascination at the time with the workings of the brain. After a frustrating term as a neurology resident however, I complained to the specialist in charge that despite all our efforts none of our patients were getting any better. He realized I was results-oriented and suggested Ophthalmology. I transferred over and have never looked back. I love the surgery and the fact that whether it is LASIK, cataract or a corneal transplant, the patients are generally happy. In this position you can make a difference to people's lives. Being an ophthalmic surgeon is a privilege.<sup>28</sup>

Dr. Gerard Sutton

### 31

I decided on ophthalmology when I was doing a medical student rotation with an ophthalmologist in Roanoke. He taught me how to use the indirect ophthalmoscope. I saw the fundus for the first time as a medical student. Up until that point we'd been using the direct ophthalmoscope which gives a very limited view but when I could see the whole lens filled with retina for the first time, it was a very impressive thing. At that moment I knew ophthalmology was for me. I thought to myself that any field that has that great a toy has got something going for it.<sup>29</sup>

Dr. Andrew Lee

### 32

I love ophthalmology. Sight is the most precious gift from God. Looking after this gift is a very noble work. Helping people see better, with their eyes and their minds – this has always been my ambition.<sup>30</sup>

Dr. Husam Rahal

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### 33

I love ophthalmology and feel very lucky to have been a part of this subspecialty. Vision is our most precious sense, and my job of preserving or improving it was always something my patients appreciated immensely. The feedback I received from patients was similar to the applause a musician gets when he or she finishes a performance. It is what kept me going, and that is what I miss the most now that I have discontinued seeing patients clinically and surgically.<sup>31</sup>

Jack Holladay, MD

### 34

I love ophthalmology. Eyes fascinate me, as the saying goes- 'they are the window to the soul'! On a more clinical note, I would like to work on an international level, doing charity work and camps in the developing world for people who don't have access to an ophthalmologist. Many of these individuals have blindness which is reversible and knowing I can make a difference in restoring their sight would be rewarding not only for the individual but for me too. I will literally see the difference that I will make!<sup>32</sup>

Dr. Fariyah Tariq

### 35

My career path in Ophthalmology was first ignited when I realized this specialty could really make a huge difference in peoples' lives. The medical, optical and microsurgical options that exist to restore vision are truly moving. I just cannot imagine another place that I could be where I could have as much fun and be making a difference.<sup>33</sup>

Dr. Richard Mauer

### 36

I was severely nearsighted while growing up. It was just me and another kid sitting up front in class, straining to read the lesson. I'll never forget the day I was finally fitted with glasses. It was the first time I could see the leaves on the trees. Green was never so green before. I wore contact lenses later in high school. This was especially important to me as an athlete. You feel less bound, less weighed down, less inhibited. I think being able to identify with the limitations of less-than-perfect eyesight really helped spur me on toward my profession. I learned early on in medical school what an incredible impact ophthalmology especially groundbreaking procedures has on people's lives. That's part of my motivation for developing technology like the "LAHAYE SIK," which improves the accuracy and safety of refractive surgery. I really strive to improve in some way all the procedures I perform to increase my

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patients' chances for perfect vision from cataract surgery to LASIK. I've seen gradual blindness destroy more than eyesight. It destroys people's will to live. When you're able to help restore that sight, you'd be amazed at the change in a person's disposition. Take cataract surgery, for example. I honestly believe it makes people feel ten years younger at least! People are driving, fishing, cooking, doing all the things they had abandoned with failing eyesight.<sup>34</sup>

Leon C. LaHaye, M.D.

## 37

I love practicing medicine I think that's why I decided to specialize twice! I started off in internal medicine, but grew more fascinated with eye care and the advancements being made in the field. Healthy eyesight is good medicine. I feel I can say that wholeheartedly, as an internist and an ophthalmologist. "Just seeing the transformations that occur from corrected vision is nothing short of miraculous. That's exactly what inspires me to keep up-to-date on the latest advancements in eye medicine from laser surgery to pink eye."<sup>34</sup>

Clarence Billingsley, MD

## 38

I always knew I wanted to work with people, to help them. However, a background in math and physics does not necessarily lead you down that path. When it came to choosing between the lab and medical school, the choice was clear. It's an absolute privilege to be able to improve God's gift of sight when it becomes damaged or defective. "I've been fortunate enough to have worked all over the world, from Africa to Arkansas, and the joy expressed by the people I've helped needs no translation. I've never once regretted leaving the lab behind."<sup>34</sup>

Zvi Avinar, MD

## 39

I chose Ophthalmology because the eye seemed like the most interesting part of biology to me. Eyes are connected, and so a part of, the brain. We are able to make many interventions to improve people's eyes and vision in Ophthalmology, whereas making changes to someone's brain is a little more difficult. I really enjoy the surgery in Ophthalmology and all of the different interventions with lasers, etc. that we are able to do to help people with their vision.<sup>35</sup>

Douglas von Brauchitsch, MD

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