

Margarita Labkovich

## Personal Statement

Throughout my life, I have always looked for opportunities to serve and educate and enjoyed seeing the difference that it makes. I recognize that some of the most consequential issues in ophthalmology are access to care, identifying who receives care, how outcomes are being measured, and what technologies can extend ophthalmic outreach and education. This pursuit requires a unique set of tools, such as understanding the landscape of healthcare systems, innovation, research-based inquiry, mentorship, and leadership.

In medical school, I led an ophthalmology interest group at Mount Sinai, where we organized career lecture series and ophthalmology skills learning events, and worked closely with a student-run ophthalmology clinic, helping medical students develop an interest in the field and connecting them with shadowing and research opportunities. This involvement ignited my passion for ophthalmology, mentorship, and making a bigger impact.

Throughout my academic journey, I have been actively involved in translational and clinical research and have published 10 peer-reviewed articles. I pursued neurobiological bench lab work for years leading up to medical school, during which I led my own projects focused on mapping brain connections underlying emotional regulation between the prefrontal cortex and amygdala. During medical school and residency, I have enjoyed immersing myself in various research projects across subspecialties and have developed an interest in data analysis and scientific writing.

While in medical school at Mount Sinai, I got exposed to global mission work and joined a medical mission trip to perform health screenings for a senior population at the US-Mexico border in Nogales, Arizona, to help address their cardiovascular comorbidities. I helped fundraise, organized the equipment, and served as a treasurer of the mission, which taught me operational nuances of global health work, including equipment logistics, patient recruitment, and the obstacles to providing sustainable care.

My experience in Nogales encouraged me to seek an ophthalmology-specific mission, which I found through the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria in Madrid, Spain, that collaborates with Mount Sinai. Working alongside their ophthalmology department, I conducted screening exams for refugee communities and assisted in both the clinic and operating room. This mission broadened my perspective on international paradigms for vision care delivery and helped me realize the importance of sustainable care.

Given my interest in health systems and policy, I pursued a master's degree in international affairs with a concentration on global health at Tsinghua University in China. As a part of my thesis, I collaborated with the World Economic Forum to examine China's transition toward a value-based healthcare model in the context of its aging population and rising burden of chronic disease. Through interviews with policymakers, insurers, Ministry of Health officials, physicians, and internationally engaged academic institutions, I gained a nuanced appreciation

for how systemic alignment across public and private sectors can be leveraged to deliver care to vulnerable populations at scale.

These experiences helped me recognize that access to vision care in underserved environments is as much a technological and logistical challenge as it is a clinical one. As a medical student, I co-founded a virtual reality start-up called Retina Technologies, designed to administer comprehensive vision screening exams on a portable, purpose-built platform for deployment in global health contexts. I was the head of clinical validation and development and ran two successful pilot trials with the device.

While in residency, I had the pleasure of being selected for the wetlab committee to help develop the wetlab curriculum for the residents. I work closely with the program leadership of Manhattan Eye and Ear Hospital to organize wet labs and ensure that residents are developing appropriate surgical skills at each level of training. I believe that early surgical education is essential, and I am glad to be contributing to the residents' educational curriculum and having this organizational experience as a trainee.

In my future career, I aspire to work in an academic setting, continuing to be involved in resident education, research, and global health work. The Heed Ophthalmic Foundation Residents Retreat represents a unique opportunity for academic mentorship and leadership development within ophthalmology. I want to learn from faculty who have navigated the transition from being a trainee to becoming clinician-scientists and leaders in the field. I want to understand how academic ophthalmologists have structured their years after training and how their clinical pursuits integrate with their organizational work. I would also like to contribute the breadth of my background in technology, policy, and clinical research to this experience, while helping shape and empower my own academic pursuits.