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Personal Statement –Annual Heed Ophthalmic Foundation Residents Retreat

Early in my premedical career, two experiences had lasting influence over my subsequent training and future career goals. The first occurred while shadowing a radiation oncologist as an undergraduate. During the visit, a patient with newly diagnosed prostate cancer asked a question about treatment options. The response from the clinician was simple and profound— we don't know. This was my first encounter with the uncertainty inherent to the practice of medicine. The attending followed with important elaboration— our research group is working on finding the answer. I joined the study and a few years later, we published results of a statewide clinical trial that compared quality of life metrics for prostate cancer treatment with radiotherapy or surgery. The experience crystallized my understanding of the force-multiplier effect of well-designed clinical research. The agency to develop new knowledge that could help patients was exhilarating.

The second seminal experience occurred during my postbaccalaureate year. Inspired by coursework in visual physiology, I arranged to shadow an ophthalmologist. A few months later, I watched a surgeon introduce instruments into the eye— I was struck by the ability to manipulate intraocular structures with such exacting precision. In the clinic, I was fascinated by the ophthalmologist's ability to examine details of the ocular structures with the slit lamp and indirect ophthalmoscope. I saw many patients whose quality of life had been meaningfully improved by medical and surgical eye care. From these experiences, I knew I would pursue the field of ophthalmology.

These two encounters animated my pursuit of a career in academic ophthalmology. I sought to integrate my growing research skillset with my discovery of the field of eye care. Shortly thereafter, I was fortunate to begin a one-year Research Fellowship with the Retina Service of Wills Eye Hospital. Through this formative period, our group studied anti-VEGF therapy outcomes, national trends in retinal practice patterns, and sociodemographic factors in retinal care. Continued collaboration with these colleagues has led to over 130 articles, book chapters, and conference abstracts. The work has provided new, real-world clinical knowledge and identified sociodemographic risk factors for disparities in vision loss from retinal disease.

During my research year and beyond, I was the beneficiary of numerous thoughtful mentors who guided my research work and professional pursuits. I quickly perceived the tremendous impact of counseling younger trainees. Wanting to share my own experiences, I joined an ophthalmology mentorship program at my medical school. One of the great pleasures of my professional life has been guiding my mentee through medical school and the transition to ophthalmology residency. My mentee successfully matched to ophthalmology residency at Wills Eye Hospital, and I now have the privilege of continuing to support him in the clinical setting.

The prospect of a better future for patients motivates my pursuit of an academic ophthalmology career. Through research work, I will seek to better characterize disease processes and improve the effectiveness of therapeutics. Through mentorship and medical education, I will aim to foster the next generation of clinicians and researchers. Most recently, I was selected to be a co-Chief Resident at Wills Eye Hospital. I am excited by the opportunity to lead and serve the residency as well as advocate for patients in this new role. Looking forward, I will continue to seek leadership positions to help make the collective efforts of our field purposeful, efficient, and patient-oriented. In pursuing a clinical fellowship in vitreoretinal surgery, I will develop the skills to manage the most medically and surgically complex vitreoretinal conditions. Mitigating sociodemographic disparity in the vitreoretinal field will remain a focus of my research and practice. There is much work to be done to protect the sight of generations to come— through a career in academic ophthalmology, I am eager to make my contribution.