

Personal statement: Hamzah Aweidah, MD

My path in ophthalmology has not followed a straight line, but it has been intentional at every step. At every turn, it has been guided by a deep and enduring curiosity about the eye and the stories it tells through disease. Now, as an ophthalmology resident at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (UPMC), I see this chapter not simply as training, but as a deliberate investment in a lifelong calling within academic medicine in the United States

I completed my initial ophthalmology residency and fellowship training outside the United States. During that time, I was fortunate to gain broad clinical experience, teach trainees, and become deeply involved in research. As my interests in academic ophthalmology continued to grow, I began to see the United States as a place where I could further develop as a clinician, researcher, and educator. When I decided to transition my career, I also made the deliberate choice to repeat residency training. While this was not an easy decision, it felt necessary. I wanted to truly understand the U.S. clinical and academic system from the inside—its workflows, expectations, and training culture—rather than stepping into it halfway. This experience has allowed me to integrate more naturally into a system that was initially unfamiliar and has given me a stronger foundation for a future academic role here.

What continues to inspire me about ophthalmology is its unique harmony of precision, innovation, and discovery. It is a field where the smallest structures hold profound significance, and where science and patient care are inseparably intertwined. During my earlier training, I had the opportunity to work on a gene therapy study for achromatopsia. When I uncovered an unexpected genetic variant, I witnessed firsthand how curiosity at the bedside can ignite breakthroughs in the lab. That moment solidified my commitment to academic medicine—a space where questions are not only welcomed, but pursued with intention.

My research has since focused on inherited retinal diseases, particularly *PRPF31*-associated retinitis pigmentosa. I am currently involved in developing the first non-human primate model of this condition using CRISPR/Cas9 gene editing—work that aims to better understand disease progression and open the door to gene-based therapies. What drives me is not just the science itself, but the journey it represents: from patient to discovery, and back again to patient care. It is this cycle of learning, questioning, and advancing that I find deeply meaningful.

Residency has been the point where all these threads have come together. In the clinic, on consults, and during call, I find the greatest fulfillment in moments when science informs care, and care inspires new questions. These are the moments that remind me why I chose this path and reaffirm my commitment to academic ophthalmology—where healing, teaching, and discovery exist side by side.

Having intentionally reshaped my path to be part of academic ophthalmology in the U.S., I am especially eager to learn from those who have walked this road before me. Understanding how clinician-educators balance patient care, research, mentorship, and long-term vision is invaluable as I continue to define my own trajectory. The Heed Ophthalmic Foundation Residents Retreat represents more than an opportunity—it is a community where shared purpose, mentorship, and inspiration converge.

I am committed to a future in academic ophthalmology that is grounded in compassionate patient care, meaningful research, and dedicated teaching. The mission of the Heed Foundation resonates deeply with my own aspirations. It would be a true honor to be part of a program that nurtures the next generation of leaders—those who will not only advance the field, but shape its future with curiosity, integrity, and purpose.