

# OUTSTANDING FEMALE LEADER IN OPHTHALMOLOGY



## GRACE SUN, MD

Dr. Sun is the Ophthalmology Residency Program Director and an Assistant Professor in Ophthalmology at New York-Presbyterian Hospital/Weill Cornell Medicine in New York City. She is President-Elect of Women in Ophthalmology (WIO) and started Weill Cornell Ophthalmology's East Africa Eye Care Program.

### 1. Please share with us your background.

I like to say that I grew up in the New York Public Library. As the daughter of Chinese immigrants who owned a fish store in Queens, I spent my summers working behind the cash register with my nose in library books. My father, who left his career in education for a chance to come to the United States, taught me about resilience, grit, and hard work. My mother rounded out those lessons with her example of grace, humility, and generosity.

When I set foot on Stanford University's campus as a college freshman, I felt like I had won the lottery. To this public school kid from New York City, being among the rows of palm trees made me feel like I was walking around a country club—talk about imposter syndrome! Yet, like my immigrant parents, I was drawn far from

home by the possibilities of this experience and was excited about the opportunities it offered. While at Stanford, I continued to push myself outside my comfort zone and later became brave enough to serve 2 years as a Peace Corps volunteer in Nicaragua.

Volunteering with the Peace Corps was a formative experience. It solidified my commitment to care for others through a career in medicine and to tackle the health disparities in my community. I came full circle back to New York for medical school at Weill Cornell Medical College and stayed on for residency training at New York Presbyterian Hospital/Weill Cornell. I chose to pursue a career in ophthalmology for the opportunity to restore sight and dramatically change people's quality of life, both at home and abroad. Locally, I lead Cornell's community eye care program, which serves

the uninsured, many of whom are homeless, indigent, or undocumented. I have continued to work globally by establishing Cornell's East Africa Eye Care collaboration in Tanzania and serving as a voluntary faculty ophthalmologist with Orbis International.

As a comprehensive ophthalmologist and cataract surgeon, I find great joy in caring for patients. Additionally, my career has been enhanced by my roles in education as a residency program director, in ophthalmic leadership such as within the American Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO), in advocacy as a past president of the New York State Ophthalmological Society (NYSOS), and in the community of Women in Ophthalmology (WIO).

I am a mother to an almost 4-year-old daughter who wants to be an eye doctor or a princess and a wife to a warrior in education reform. As a fam-

ily, we enjoy taking urban hikes and finding the best pizza in NYC.

## 2. What is the focus of your recent research?

My research interests are driven by my desire to find solutions to problems that affect areas of ophthalmology about which I am most passionate, including global health and education.

For example, Tanzania is a country of more than 50 million people but has just roughly 50 full-time ophthalmologists. Western Tanzania specifically is home to a growing population of patients with diabetes and hypertension, so a major challenge there is maximizing the use of scarce eye health resources to provide necessary ophthalmic care. I helped to determine the prevalence of hypertension and diabetic retinopathy, associated risk factors, and relevant patient knowledge for this population and suggested some parameters to focus their eye care services.

Another area of interest for me is in residency education and surgical training, such as looking at diversity trends in the ophthalmology match and recruitment, the use of simulation in cataract surgical training, and global health education in residency training.

## 3. What has your experience been collaborating with industry?

Our industry partners are important collaborators in education and training. As a residency program director, I am particularly sensitive to the concern of undue industry influence in medical education. We educate trainees on potential conflicts of interest and focus on preparing them to interact with industry, to utilize evidence-based medical research, and to promote and protect the public's interest.

I currently lead the surgical skills lab of the Association of University Professors in Ophthalmology Surgical Curriculum in Ophthalmology (AUPO

SCOR) program. The goal of the SCOR is to provide a standardized system of surgical training and assessment of competency for ophthalmology residents. Another key objective is to allow trainees to learn ophthalmic surgery on multiple surgical platforms (as most programs typically use only one platform) and to access a variety of new devices that may not be available through their program. SCOR seeks to address the lack of accessible educational resources to support surgical competency and decrease variability in skill sets. Our collaborations with industry have been immensely valuable.

## 4. In your opinion, how is the role of women in ophthalmology evolving?

*Who Says Women Can't Be Doctors?* is one of my daughter's favorite picture books. It tells the story of Elizabeth Blackwell, MD, the first woman physician in the United States. Because all of my daughter's doctors are women, as is her "Mommy," it is puzzling for her to try to imagine a time when women were not allowed to be doctors.

In addition to my daughter's reaction, several other realities lead me to feel more optimistic about women's role in ophthalmology. An increasing number of women ophthalmologists are entering practice, and a growing number of women are assuming leadership roles as chairs of academic departments, key opinion leaders in industry, and entrepreneurs. As a member of the WIO board, I have watched the organization's membership quadruple over the past 5 years and expand to include chapters across the United States and globally. Women continue to organize as seen in subspecialty groups such as the American Glaucoma Society (AGS), American Society of Retina Specialists (ASRS), and North American Neuro-Ophthalmology Society (NANOS), as there is much more work to be done for this community of women in ophthalmology.

## 5. What hurdles do you feel women in health care still face?

The research on women in medicine has slightly dampened my optimism. We face stubborn challenges that we will continue to overcome in order to achieve parity in pay and equity in representation in leadership, research recognition, and academic promotion. One of my own research projects revealed an alarming finding that women ophthalmology residents performed fewer surgical procedures during training than their male counterparts.

Organizations such as WIO are working on initiatives to target these biases. WIO started a Clinical Trials Program with our industry partners to support women who are interested in leading research. The WIO Speakers Bureau showcases dynamic women speakers on diverse topics in ophthalmology to eliminate *manels*, or all-male panels. Our Summer Symposium features negotiation workshops and surgical labs for skill acquisition and development. Additionally, AUPO members established Women Professors of Ophthalmology to support the promotion of women in academics to full professors. Additionally, the AUPO Program Directors Council has a working group called Women in Ophthalmology Training, which is dedicated to diving deeper into gender issues in training.

Despite these initiatives, structural barriers, implicit biases, and harassment continue to exist in medicine and may hinder the progress of women in ophthalmology. COVID-19 highlighted some of the unique challenges for women in medicine. Women carry a disproportionate number of hours of child and elder care compared to their male counterparts. One concrete example of how this affects women is that fewer women were lead authors on COVID-19-related papers in 2020—their representation in lead authorship was 23% lower than in 2019. From there, a lower number of

research publications, for example, may affect the promotion timeline.

Structural changes at the institution level that can support women in medicine include offering more robust childcare support, enabling more flexible clinical schedules, scheduling fewer department meetings around dinner time, shifting or stopping the tenure clock on promotions, and providing implicit bias training and bystander training. However, to do this, we need more women in leadership to create these changes. As Marian Wright Edelman, Founder and President of the Children's Defense Fund, said, "You can't be what you can't see."

### 6. What advice can you offer to young female ophthalmologists who are in training or just beginning their careers?

Build relationships, make connections, and network. I used to think of networking as a bad word, conjuring up images of businessmen standing around and giving sales pitches. In reality, networking is important for women, as many opportunities arise through these social engagements. So, go to an ophthalmology meeting such as the WIO Summer Symposium and network, or join a young ophthalmology community and attend the AAO YO or ASCRS YES events. Connect with mentors and sponsors and build on those relationships for yourself and others. Make it a goal to introduce yourself, ask a question, compliment a speaker on their talk, raise your hand, or connect with others on social media. You'll find that ophthalmology is an incredibly supportive community.

### 7. Can you propose a unique or creative idea that may help women in ophthalmic practices?

I recently received a piece of great advice: Every professional obligation on your calendar should be reflected on your CV. It has been shown that women often get tasked with less valued contributions such as serving on committees or writing patient educa-

tion materials. Get credit, and take credit. We may tend to make excuses for our success and undervalue ourselves when we should be owning and promoting our achievements!

Lastly, speak up and ask for what you want. If you don't immediately get it, don't think of it as a failure but as an opportunity. Be specific about your goal—whether it's a promotion, a higher salary, or more support—and work at it. Then ask again. If you're successful in this process and your request still isn't granted, then reflect on whether you are in the right place to advance your career. ■

### PUBLISHED WORKS

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  - Chan RV, Yonekawa Y, Morrison MA, et al. Association between assisted reproductive technology and advanced retinopathy of prematurity. *Clin Ophthalmol.* 2010;4:1385-1390.
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(depo-medrol) injection during pars plana vitrectomy. *Retin Cases Brief Rep.* 2009;3(4):336-339.

### PROFESSIONAL SOCIETY MEMBERSHIPS

- American Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO) | 2006 to Present
- Women in Ophthalmology (WIO), New York | 2010 to Present
- Association of University Professors of Ophthalmology (AUPO) | 2012 to Present
- New York State Ophthalmological Society (NYSOS) | 2012 to Present
- American Society of Cataract and Refractive Surgery (ASCRS) | 2013 to Present
- Women in Ophthalmology (WIO) | 2014 to Present
- Chinese American Ophthalmological Society (CAOS) | 2009 to 2017
- Pan American Association of Ophthalmology (PAAO) | 2009 to 2015

### HONORS & AWARDS

- Secretariat Award, AAO | 2021

- Top Doctors, *New York Magazine* | 2021
- Top Doctors in New York, Castle Connolly | 2021, 2020
- Humanitarian Award, WIO | 2017
- Secretariat Award, AAO | 2016
- Educators Award, WIO | 2016
- Achievement Award, Asia Pacific Academy of Ophthalmology | 2016
- Achievement Award, AAO | 2015
- Resident Teaching Award, Weill Cornell Medicine, Ophthalmology | 2015
- Leadership Development Program, AAO | 2015
- New York Super Doctors Rising Stars, New York Super Doctors | 2014, 2015
- Leadership Development Program, NYSOS | 2012
- Paul Kayser International Scholar, PAAO | 2010
- National Eye Institute Travel Grant, Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology | 2008
- Edward Norton Prize in Ophthalmology, Weill Medical College of Cornell University | 2005
- Honors in Human Biology, Stanford University | 1997