Bascom Palmer Establishes New Center Dedicated to Inherited Retinal Diseases

With support from a generous donor, Bascom Palmer Eye Institute has established the Mark J. Daily Inherited Retinal Diseases Research Center, bringing renewed hope for patients facing these incurable vision disorders.

The new center will be home to research into inherited retinal diseases, such as retinitis pigmentosa, which affect millions of people globally.

“Bascom Palmer is in the forefront of genetics, stem cells and imaging, making it a natural location for a new research center,” said Mark J. Daily, M.D., a retinal specialist at the Wheaton Eye Clinic in Wheaton, Illinois, who completed his residency at Bascom Palmer in 1977.

“Thanks to the extraordinary philanthropy of our alumnus Dr. Mark J. Daily, Bascom Palmer will have a renowned center where cutting-edge inherited retinal diseases research is conducted and enhanced,” said Eduardo C. Alfonso, M.D., Kathleen and Stanley J. Glaser Chair in Ophthalmology and director of Bascom Palmer Eye Institute. “The center will allow us to multiply the output of research and clinical trials in inherited retinal disease, and we will integrate translational
research with a superior patient experience.”

By providing a home for scientific research, clinical trials, patient care and medical education, the new inherited retinal disease (IRD) center will usher in a new era for the institute’s growing team of retinal specialists. Scheduled to open later this year, the new IRD center will provide clinical care and specialized testing on the second floor of the institute’s main building, while research space will be located in the Evelyn F. and William L. McKnight Vision Research Center.

“Bascom Palmer clinician-scientists are in a position to make indelible strides in the field of hereditary retinal eye diseases,” said Henri R. Ford, M.D., M.H.A., dean and chief academic officer of the Miller School of Medicine. “Given the talent of its leadership and members, along with a generous gift to name it, this center will serve as a model for transformational eye disease research.”

**Bascom Palmer’s Gene Therapy Program**

“New research could aid in the rapid identification of these complex conditions and one day might halt the progression to blindness or lead to a cure,” said Byron L. Lam, M.D., the center's director.

Today, the institute has one of the largest gene therapy programs in the nation with additional clinical trials and studies coming soon, according to the center’s Director Byron L. Lam, M.D., professor of ophthalmology, Mark J. Daily Chair
in Ophthalmology, medical director of clinical research, and academic division chief and medical director of neuroophthalmology.

“Our patients are seen by clinicians who can diagnose inherited eye disorders, and we have a large pool of patients whose genes have been linked to specific conditions,” said Dr. Lam. “We also have an excellent infrastructure with novel imaging techniques and instrumentations that will contribute to our basic science and translational research.”

Inherited retinal diseases affect millions of people globally, reducing vision and causing blindness. There are more than 300 types of IRDs, which usually result from a mutation in one or more of the genes that codes for a retinal protein. These rare blinding conditions include retinitis pigmentosa (RP), achromatopsia, choroideremia, Leber congenital amaurosis, X-linked retinoschisis and Stargardt macular dystrophy.

“Even though traditional gene therapy is very powerful, it can only treat one mutation at a time,” said Vittorio Porciatti, D.Sc., professor of ophthalmology, vice chairman of research and James L. Knight Professor in Ophthalmology. “Therefore, our basic science program is generating in-house therapies that are gene agnostic. By targeting pathways common to many mutations, we could develop one therapy that is effective against multiple mutations.”

Dr. Lam said the Daily Center will advance translational research in the treatment of IRDs that will lead to clinical trials in a reasonable time frame.

“The new endowment will support early-stage studies, which can hopefully draw funding from government agencies as well as
industrial partners,” he said. “New research could aid in the rapid identification of these complex conditions and one day might halt the progression to blindness or lead to a cure.”