

Planning for the Next Generation of Eye Banking: A Focus on Mentoring

The R. Townley Paton Lecture 2018

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What an honor and humbling experience to accept the R. Townley Paton award in front of my idols, my peers, former students, my family, and my mentors. Thanks to the committee for thinking of me and thanks to Dr. Paton, his family, and the previous Paton winners for paving the way for me to be here today.

Acknowledgments for a lecture or award often go at the end of the presentation but I want to mention some special people in my life first since they are all big reasons why I am receiving this award and serve as the basis of this talk.

All of you in the audience had a point in your lives where you hit a crossroads and were unsure which direction to proceed. Whether you were in medical school and had to decide on a career path or decide on starting your career in eye banking, someone made an impact in your life or took time to help you in making the decision to go forward in your career path. Three physicians and cornea specialists introduced me to the cornea specialty during medical school and residency and started me down a career in the specialty of cornea transplants and eye banking. Thank to John R. Bierly, MD, Woodford VanMeter, MD, and Doug Katz, MD, mentors early in my career at the University of Kentucky. After all the years have gone by they all still guiding me and steering me in the right direction even today. Thanks to all three of you.

Words cannot express my love and strong feeling of appreciation for my fellowship mentors, Ivan R. Schwab, MD, and Mark J. Mannis, MD. The impact these two physicians from the University of California Davis Medical Center had on my career is indescribable. I can still remember going to several programs for my cornea fellowship interviews 16 years ago. I had one question that I asked every program. Besides your program, where would you interview or consider a top cornea fellowship in the country today. All these wonderful programs and superb corneal surgeons themselves said the same thing, the University of California Davis Medical Center with Dr. Schwab and Dr. Mannis.

I remember in my interview with Ivan, I was fascinated that in a one hour lunch I learned about why woodpeckers don't get headaches, that conch can regrow an eye in 4 months, and frogs in the arctic have cryopreservative material in their corneas that prevent them from freezing and going blind. Yet, perhaps the most important thing this boy who was born and raised in Kentucky heard was that he had season tickets on the floor to the Sacramento Kings professional basketball team. The interview process took me to meet Dr. Mannis next and he asked me two important questions. The first question was to recite what the best book I had read the last 6 months before the interview. While I suspected he wanted to hear me say the book, "Cornea" and its two-volume set, honesty took over and J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series came out of my mouth before I knew it. Feeling as if I had just said the most stupid answer possible, Dr. Mannis reached down into his desk drawer and pulled out a copy of Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire. What a relief as he smiled back at me. His next question was to let him know what I wanted from my fellowship year and my answer was lifelong mentors. Boy did you both deliver more than I could have ever imagined. The quote by an unknown author sums up what I feel for these two men, "A truly great mentor is hard to find, difficult to part with and impossible to forget".

I also want to thank my lifetime mentors—my mom, dad and sister. I am fortunate enough to have my dad here today who was my best man in my wedding. He has always been present for me throughout my life to help me take the right path. You are my biggest hero! My mom and sister had to stay back home in Kentucky and while I miss them here, I am so thankful for how they have helped shape my life. A special thank to my wife Michelle and our 3 children, Ashton (the oldest), Addy (the youngest), and my son, Aidan. Michelle is the biggest reason I am here in front of you. She doesn't get the credit she deserves for the mentorship she provides everyday to our family. She has been by my side since medical school and I am so

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lucky to have a lady like her in my life. Thanks so much for all you guys do for me! To paraphrase a quote by one of our greatest presidents, a man who just happened to be born 10 miles from my birthplace, “I am successful today because these people I have just mentioned believed in me and I didn’t have the heart to let any of them down.”

Let us talk about the art of mentorship and how we can plan for the next generation of eye bankers. The talk really begins with mentorship and the 16 cornea fellows that I have had the pleasure of working with over the years. The fellows of Eye Consultants of Atlanta have taught me more than they will ever know and I am so proud and thankful to have spent time with them and remain excited about their bright futures.

As my fellows can attest, one of my favorite things about mentoring is teaching people something they don’t already know. Have you ever wondered where the word mentor originated? I did a little research that took me back to Ancient Greece, to Homer’s epic poem, *Odyssey*. In the story, Odysseus was the King of Ithaca and left for battle to protect his land. Knowing the battle would take years, he left his most trusted childhood friend, Mentor, in charge of not only his kingdom but of his beloved son, Telemachus. From this story in 8th century B.C., the word mentor has become a common word to refer to a teacher or counselor. In fact, The Webster dictionary definition of mentor is the following: a wise and trusted counselor or guide, a tutor/coach, and influential sponsor or supporter.¹

For those of you that attended medical school you may remember that on graduation day, the physician’s oath is recited prior to receiving your graduation diplomas. It is not a coincidence that the very first oath of the 10 points is as follows: I will respect the hard-won scientific gains of those physicians that have preceded me, and gladly share my knowledge with those who follow. Passing on what you have learned to others is so important that the very first point in the oath that is taken as a physician is about mentorship.

Thinking back to all the mentors I’ve had over the years, I’ve noticed they share a number of attributes. Mentors are those special individuals who care about you enough to share their wisdom and guide you along a personal and professional journey. Let’s highlight some of the most important traits shared by excellent mentors.

Mentors are problem-solving partners. Interestingly, the root of the word “mentor”—“men”—means “to think”. A mentor, therefore, is also a thinker. Thinking is such a highly relevant attribute for someone that is tasked with helping you to solve difficult problems. You don’t have to have all the answers, you just have to be willing to share what you know when you are a good mentor.

Mentors give you directions, but leave it to you to find your own way. I can remember so many times growing up and having a difficult decisions to make and asking my dad what I should do. After we would discuss the pros and cons of the issue, I would then look to him to give me the answer. As with any great mentor, he would follow by saying that I had a tough decision to make and would have to make it on my own. After seeing my frustration he would say, “I know you will make the right decision”. He had faith that our discussion that night and other nights would prepare me and help me go in the right direction without directly telling me what to do himself. Mentors can lay out possible options you can pursue, or the directions you might take in your career, or in life. But ultimately, the decisions are entirely up to you, and the responsibility for the consequences of those decisions are in your hands.

Mentors challenge you. My best mentors urged me to set my sights on higher goals and held me accountable for reaching them. A quote by Bob Proctor says, “A mentor is someone who sees more talent and ability within you, than you see in yourself, and helps bring it out of you.”

Mentors tell you the truth. Often, the greatest gift a mentor can bestow upon you is the truth, even if it stings or hurts to hear it. A perfect example of this is hearing things you did not like to hear from a parent or even hearing ways to be better from your fellowship preceptor as I did from Drs. Schwab and Mannis on many occasions during my surgical training. Those words are meant to make us better and to inspire us to be great.

Mentors give you courage to take action. Mentors are often the ones who give you the courage to take that first step—or leap—into the unknown. A true mentor creates a culture of excellence and they have so much confidence in you than they feel you can better even than perhaps you ever dreamed you could be.

Mentors let you take the credit. They want you to be the one to succeed. They have already made it and now they feel it is your turn to be the one that makes it. Being that we are in Chicago I had to use a Michael Jordan analogy and how his college coach, Dean Smith, helped him become the best basketball player in the world. Michael stated about his coach, “No one had a bigger influence on my life than coach. He was my mentor, my teacher, my second father. He wanted me to be great.” Six championships later, many will argue he is indeed the greatest ever.

Perhaps the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu (a contemporary of Confucius) summed this up the best, “When the student is ready, the teacher will appear. When the student is truly ready... the teacher will disappear.”

Now what is the link to mentorship and the Eye Bank Association of America (EBAA), the cornea, and the this award? The link is in the man behind this award, R. Townley Paton. He was a great mentor for eye banking and its future. His idea to start the world's first eye bank in 1944 has now blossomed to the development of the Eye Bank Association of America in 1961 and now in 2018, this organization oversees nearly 70 eye banks and has been the model for development of eye banks and eye bank association all across the world.

I first became involved in developing leaders in 2010 when the EBAA nominated me to the American Academy of Ophthalmology Leadership Development Program. The program is designed to identify future leaders in various organizations and involves an intensive 1-week leadership development immersion course along with development of a project that to help the organization that nominated the future leader. In talking with the leadership of the EBAA at that time they had a concern that eye banking on the physician side had many longterm experienced cornea surgeons but very few young corneal surgeon involvement. As my project the EBAA leadership decided to start a leadership development program of our own. The first EBAA Leadership Development Program was held in New Orleans in 2011 consisting of 30 young physicians and faculty. The program was designed to teach young corneal surgeons about the EBAA, find ways to get them more involved and develop new ideas to get young surgeon involvement in the EBAA from fellows and physicians just out of cornea fellowship. Many of the surgeons in that first meeting are now in leadership positions within the EBAA today such as the Accreditation Board, the Medical Advisory Board and the Board of Directors. Out of this program a new recommendation was presented to the Association of University Professors (AUPO) to adopt a new requirement for accredited cornea fellowships requiring fellows to spend time in the eye bank for their program to continue full accreditation. This requirement was quickly accepted and now remains a requirement of cornea fellowship accreditation. Additionally, two more leadership programs have been completed since the inaugural meeting. Additional peer reviewed publications linking corneal surgeons with eye banking in journals such as the *JAMA Ophthalmology*, *International Ophthalmology Clinics*, and the *International Journal of Eye Banking*.

For those of you in the audience that have not become involved with the EBAA as a corneal surgeon, know that the EBAA wants you. We have an annual meeting every summer that all of you should attend. We have numerous committees that any of you can join. Many mentors exist that

can facilitate your involvement. On a local level, visit your eye bank and get to know their staff. Watch them with new tissue processing procedures such as DSEK and DMEK if you have never seen these. If you are not in a teaching program where there are students and residents or fellows, you still have ways to become a mentor in your local community. Let the eye bank know when new corneal surgeons come to the area that you would love to have them observe in the OR. Nothing is more fearful than doing your first keratoplasty cases on your own without your teacher so having a familiar face and collaborator in the community is a great way to help out a young surgeon. Experienced local surgeons may also want to learn a new technique like DMEK so let the eye bank know any local surgeons are welcome to observe you doing these procedures. This is a great way to establish a connection with new and experienced corneal surgeons together in the community.

Finally, perhaps the most important point of all to help our next generation is collaboration. At this point in time I see eye banks competing with each other rather than cooperating with each other. I see groups within the EBAA focusing on making a profit on corneal tissue. How about adopting the following philosophy instead, "Let's focus on collaboration instead of competition." Competition makes us faster, but collaboration makes us better. If you look at the original Code of Ethics for the EBAA, we were founded on the following parameters: 1) No eye bank competition, 2) no profit on corneal tissue. I think some of us have forgotten these principles or maybe the principles are just being ignored out of sheer greed. Regardless of the reason, please remember why we are here. The EBAA, eye banks, and corneal surgeons are here to help our patients get cornea transplant to restore their vision. Hopefully our next generation will see a collaboration and sharing of ideas to help patients rather than proprietary interests and secrecy in the eye banking community for personal gain.

Henry Ford said it best. Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success. Remember our purpose and remember that what you do today has an impact on future leaders in the next generation. As Mother Teresa says, "Yesterday is gone, tomorrow has not yet come, we have only today, let us begin. Be a mentor and make a difference in someone's life to get them involved with the EBAA like my mentors did for me.

REFERENCES:

Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary (10th ed.). 1999. Springfield, MA: Merriam Webster incorporated.