Mark Washburn

AN EYE FOR OPHTHALMOLOGIC SUCCESS

Dr. Michael Zegans is the inaugural Francis A. L'Esperance, Jr., M.D. Visual Sciences Scholar.

LASER CORRECTIVE EYE SURGERIES ARE SO COMMON that it's easy to forget that they were once experimental. The invention of excimer lasers in the 1970s laid the foundation for such procedures by allowing for the removal of misshapen and diseased tissue on the surface of the eye without causing burning or cutting of healthy tissue. Further innovation and experimentation by eye surgeon Dr. Francis L'Esperance D '53, MED '54 and others led to widespread adoption of laser-based eye procedures in the late 1990s. Since then, hundreds of thousands of people worldwide have benefited from the use of lasers to correct their vision.

Now, an endowment created by L'Esperance at the Geisel School of Medicine aims to fuel future scientific advances in ophthalmology and new treatments for diseases of the eye. Michael Zegans, MD, a professor of surgery and of microbiology and immunology at Geisel, has been named the inaugural Francis A. L'Esperance, Jr., M.D. Visual Sciences Scholar.

"Dr. L'Esperance has made many and diverse contributions to ophthalmology, and having a fellowship bearing his name is an incredible honor," says Zegans, who is section chief of ophthalmology at Dartmouth-Hitchcock and faculty director of the Health Professions Program at Dartmouth College.

Zegans' research focuses primarily on ocular surface infection. His investigations have included two large National Eye Institute-funded clinical studies of bacterial and fungal corneal infections—Steroids for Corneal Ulcer Trial (SCUT) and Mycotic Ulcer Treatment Trial (MUTT)—in collaboration with Aravind Eye Hospital and the Proctor Foundation at University of California San Francisco. Zegans says the L'Esperance endowment will enable him to apply what's learned in those studies to basic science investigations of corneal infections. In collaboration with microbiologists at Geisel, he plans to pursue new anti-microbial strategies to treat infections of the cornea.

L'Esperance understands first-hand that funding scientific research now is crucial to creating groundbreaking treatments in the future. He began exploring laser therapy for correcting near-sightedness, farsightedness, and astigmatism, and for the treatment of diabetic retinopathy, in the 1960s. In 1968, he developed the first argon laser—and seven other lasers—for ophthalmologic use and became a pioneer in its use for ophthalmological surgery and therapy. In 1987, he performed the first PRK (photo refractive keratectomy) laser eye surgery procedure. As a result, thousands of individuals suffering from diabetes have retained their sight.

Hundreds of thousands of people worldwide have benefited from the use of lasers to correct their vision, an innovation pioneered by Francis L'Esperance D '53, MED '54.

Over the decades, L'Esperance also maintained a thriving academic career, serving as a professor of clinical ophthalmology at Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, and as an attending ophthalmologist at the Edward S. Harkness Eye Institute and at Manhattan Eye, Ear and Throat Hospital. His numerous awards and honors include the prestigious Rank Prize for Optoelectronics in 2010.

Now retired, L'Esperance leaves a legacy of innovation in his field—and of generosity through the fund he has established at Geisel. As an endowment, the fund will continue to benefit ophthalmologic researchers and, most importantly, patients for generations to come.

JENNIFER DURGIN