

Introducing the American Society of Progressive Enterprising Surgeons

ASPENS aims to place more female ophthalmologists in leadership roles.

BY SHERI ROWEN, MD



Allergan recognizes the important role women eye care practitioners play within the ophthalmic and optometric communities. Visionary Insights for Eye Care Women—VIEW—is a platform established by Allergan that is dedicated to supporting and promoting women optometrists and ophthalmologists. This article is the fourth and final of a series that has run in Cataract & Refractive Surgery Today, its sister publication, Advanced Ocular Care, and its online publication, MillennialEYE (www.millennialeye.com).

WHAT IS ASPENS?

The concept of the ASPENS group (American Society of Progressive Enterprising Surgeons) was borne out of an identified need for female ophthalmologists to share an equal voice of influence within the profession as their male colleagues. Our purpose is to help the growing number of female physicians who are entering ophthalmology to contribute to the profession through mentorship, professional development, leadership roles, networking, and publishing opportunities. Our primary interests are research, education, technological innovation, and leadership within ophthalmology. As our name suggests, we believe in continual medical advancement, and we feel a great way to foster this is through the collaborative sharing of ideas between physicians and industry.

ASPENS is the sister organization to CEDARS (Cornea, External Disease and Refractive Surgery), the 24-member group of anterior segment specialists who collaborate with the ophthalmic industry through research, teaching, and speaking avenues. Like CEDARS, ASPENS' members intend to serve in consultant and advisory roles to the ophthalmic industry, write and speak on clinical topics, and have a presence at the major ophthalmic meetings. Many of our members have been making these contributions on their own for many years, myself included. However, we have been lacking a network of supportive, informed colleagues who can help us serve a broader audience.

WHAT TYPE OF EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES ARE YOU PLANNING ?

One of ASPENS' foremost missions is to develop educational projects on topics that relate specifically to ocular specialists and primary care physicians. For example, we are in the process of designing educational materials and treatment paradigms for ocular surface disease.



Figure 1. Participants in the ASPENS roundtable discussion in Austin, TX, in November 2014: Alice Epitropoulos, MD; Neda Shamie, MD; Elizabeth Yeu, MD; Sheri Rowen, MD; Dee Stephenson, MD; and Cathy McCabe, MD.

Although physicians' awareness about this syndrome has been improving in recent years, there is a real need among primary care providers for more in-depth education. This country is in the midst of an ocular surface disease epidemic that stems from a lack of identification. I routinely see patients who are near the end-stage of dry eye disease, when their tear production is shutting down, because their optometrist or general ophthalmologist did not know to look for this condition. We at ASPENS want to change that paradigm. For example, my colleagues and I believe that a test or referral for this disease should be included in patients' annual physical.

NAME SOME OF ASPENS' COLLABORATIONS AND WHAT LIES AHEAD FOR THE ORGANIZATION?

We were very excited to conduct a roundtable on dry eye disease at the ME Live symposium held on November 21–23 in Austin, Texas (Figure 1). We discussed preventive strategies for the disease, such as teaching optometrists and opticians to educate and test college-age contact lens

wearers. We would like to produce more programs like this, both for specialty meetings and for our colleagues in the industry who share similar educational goals with us. ASPENS members believe in technological innovation, and if a company has developed a product or device that we think will improve the standard of care in ophthalmology, we will be happy to discuss it in a public forum.

Currently, we are working on increasing our visibility by introducing our group to key industry leaders so they are aware of who we are and how we wish to share ideas with them about technology and standard of care in ophthalmology. These efforts are going well.

We have a high interest in collaborating with other special interest groups. We are planning a joint program with OWL (Ophthalmic Women Leaders) at the 2015 ASCRS meeting called "Confidence, Competence, and Courage," and we are planning similar collaborations with CEDARS that we expect to generate many exciting ideas and new connections. Of course, groups such as VIEW and Women In Ophthalmology are a natural fit as well.

Also, we are beginning to contribute articles to the trade publications, including a new column in *CRSToday* called "Ophthalmology 360°" that features contributions from members of ASPENS, CEDARS, and Vanguard.

HOW WILL ASPENS FOSTER FEMALE LEADERSHIP?

Eventually, mentorship and training will become a large focus for us. We want to train the younger generation of physicians how to become key opinion leaders by participating in research and clinical trials, writing papers, and speaking from the podium. It is important that female surgeons feel comfortable in these roles and work to gain a larger presence in the specialty. We think proper training, along with the support of veteran colleagues, is the way to engender confidence in the spotlight.

HOW DOES ASPENS DIFFER FROM OTHER FEMALE-FOCUSED GROUPS?

It is true that the women's groups in ophthalmology share similar missions, but our approaches may differ. Some put their resources toward personal development, some toward mentorship and networking. In this very early stage of our inception, ASPENS' key opinion leaders are primarily focused on educational efforts and collaborating with each other and our colleagues in industry on new medical innovations.

The ASPENS Executive Team

President: Sheri Rowen, MD

Vice President: Alice Epitropoulos, MD

Secretary: Jennifer Loh, MD

Treasurer/Executive Director: Laura Urdiniaiz, JD

There is room within ophthalmology for all these groups—in fact, there is a greater need than I realized, based on the number of membership requests ASPENS has received already. I think female ophthalmologists are looking for a supportive place where they can share ideas comfortably. I am encouraged to see the women in our field finally joining together to help one another succeed. In the coming years, 45% of ophthalmologists will be women, based on the enrollment figures in residency programs. If we want greater influence and representation within our specialty, we need to work collaboratively.

WHAT EXCITES YOU MOST ABOUT ASPENS?

It has been exciting to introduce female colleagues to one another and to establish relationships with industry leaders with whom we would like to work. We want to consult with R&D departments when they are evaluating new technologies, because our members are conscientious clinicians who recognize gaps in the standard of care that are ripe for improvement.

WHAT DO YOU ENVISION FOR ASPENS' FUTURE?

Again, ASPENS is in its inception stage and will continue to evolve. I think we will always keep our size conservative so that all our members know one another and feel as though they have a voice in the group.

We will establish working relationships with the groups and societies who share our goals, and perhaps in the future, we will host our own small meeting.

For the foreseeable future, in addition to the joint meeting with OWL at ASCRS, we will hold our annual business meeting to plan our outreach goals and strategies.

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