

5 Questions With Stephen A. Updegraff, MD

Dr. Updegraff shares how his father inspired him to be an ophthalmologist and discusses his passion for improving his patients' vision with LASIK.



You are the son of an ophthalmologist. How has your father influenced your approach to practicing medicine?

As a young boy, my father, Ambrose, let me tear the tape for the eye patches for his intracapsular cataract surgery patients. Those moments gave me a

glimpse of how a physician's demeanor, sincerity, and knowledge come together to comfort and heal a patient.

Trained at the University of Iowa, my father taught me the importance of seeking the best in myself and of being a lifelong learner. At age 10, I drove 5 hours with my father on Saturday mornings once a month to the University of Florida, where he would present a case. Not a weekday passes that I do not give thanks for the academic training I had, and I do my best to support residency training.

My father returned from California with palpable enthusiasm and excitement after learning phacoemulsification. The thrill that I saw in my father is what I feel when my patients' vision improves. I also felt it with the advent of LASIK and Descemet stripping endothelial keratoplasty.

At 83, my father works one half-day per week. He is one of the happiest people I know. I hope to deliver that same level of interest and enthusiasm to my patients, because ultimately, it is good medicine.

What do you enjoy most about being a LASIK surgeon?

Friday is the most popular day for LASIK in my practice. My favorite day is Saturday, when I get to share in my patients' excitement and relief at being able to see without a visual aid. My late friend and colleague, Michael Kritzinger, MD, called this "obstetrics ophthalmology"; it is as happy a moment as delivering a baby but without the mess and screams.

Describe the challenges and rewards associated with being the first ophthalmologist to perform LASIK in Asia and the third to perform the procedure in the United States.

After my residency at Louisiana State University, I went to Houston to do a fellowship with Stephen Slade, MD.

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The challenge I faced was trying to execute this plan when my two daughters were under the age of 3; my wife deserves a ton of credit. The opportunities that arose from working with Dr. Slade were mind-boggling. He was so busy lecturing and maintaining his practice that, when a trip to China came up that January, he sent me in his place, because he was already slated to be in Europe. Off I went to Asia to install lasers. It was challenging, but the trip was mainly rewarding because of the unique experiences and wonderful people I met who continue to be my friends to this day.

You have received many awards during your career. Is there one of which you are most proud?

I am proudest of receiving the Kritzinger Award for Refractive Surgery in 2007. It was the highest honor for me to give the Kritzinger Memorial Lecture, and it was probably one of the most emotional moments of my life, as I remembered Dr. Kritzinger, whose innovation, curiosity, and fun-loving nature were rare. He and I "clicked" with our wit and ideas. I miss our weekly calls and hearing the excimer laser firing in the background.

What are your interests outside of ophthalmology?

I love to spend time with my family, and doing it outdoors is even better. Like most ophthalmologists, I am competitive. As I have gotten older, I appreciate that healthy competition steepens and accelerates the learning curve in any endeavor. Two sports I enjoy are saltwater fly-fishing and stand up paddleboarding. I was invited this year to fish the historic Gold Cup Invitational Tarpon Fly Tournament in Islamorada, Florida. I also completed the 11-mile Florida State Paddleboarding Championships this past spring, and I dream of competing in Hawaii next year. ■