

Empowering the Next Generation: Mentorship and Networking at the 2024 AAO Annual Meeting

YoungMD Connect (YMDC) hosted its capstone mentorship and networking event at the 2024 AAO Annual Meeting in Chicago, offering a unique opportunity for early-career ophthalmologists to connect with leaders in the field and representatives from top industry organizations. Specifically designed for medical students, residents, and fellows, the event showcased the power of building connections, collaborating across the profession, and preparing for a thriving future in ophthalmology.

A COMMUNITY FOR ASPIRING OPHTHALMOLOGISTS

The evening drew 285 attendees, 72% of whom were residents, fellows, and early-career ophthalmologists. They participated in a dynamic program featuring a panel discussion, interactive mentorship rotations, and a vibrant networking reception (Figure 1).

Insights on Industry Collaboration

The evening began with an engaging panel discussion led by Paul C. Kang, MD; Tara Capalbo (AbbVie); and Lori Tierney (Johnson & Johnson Vision; Figure 2). The panel explored how partnerships between ophthalmologists and industry stakeholders propel innovation and bolster clinical growth.

Dr. Kang underscored the impact of such collaborations, urging attendees to take the initiative: “Partnering with industry has been pivotal in moving our practices and the field of ophthalmology forward. I urge attendees to seize opportunities to engage with industry leaders.”

Capalbo and Tierney complemented his perspective by offering actionable advice. Capalbo discussed strategies for effective cocreation, while Tierney highlighted practical steps for building professional networks and advocating for career advancement. Their insights set the tone for an evening aimed at empowering attendees with tools for success.

Personalized Guidance Through Mentorship Rotations

A hallmark of the event, the mentorship rotations featured 24 faculty mentors representing diverse subspecialties, including retina, cornea, glaucoma, global health, pediatric ophthalmology, oculoplastics, and cataract/refractive (Figure 3). Using an ask-me-anything format, these sessions encouraged candid discussions on critical career topics, including:

- Choosing between private practice and academia;
- Selecting a subspecialty;
- Balancing work and life;
- Engaging with industry; and
- Pursuing research opportunities.



Figure 1. Attendees gather during the YMDC Capstone event.



Figure 2. Panelists Tara Capalbo, Lori Tierney, and Paul C. Kang, MD, in discussion.



Figure 3. William B. Trattler, MD, with attendees during the mentorship rotations.

Robert F. Melendez, MD, MBA (Figure 4), reflected on the significance of these face-to-face interactions: “Meeting in person creates a relaxed environment to connect and explore ideas. YMDC makes it easy for mentees to approach mentors and ask questions directly.”



Figure 4. Dr. Melendez poses with (from left to right) Dagny Zhu, MD; Heather Broyles, DO; and Sayena Jabbehdari, MD, MPH, at the networking reception.

Photo courtesy of Judy Kim, MD.



Figure 5. Dr. Kim connects with attendees during the networking reception.



Figure 6. Mentors and mentees connect at the networking reception.

Key Takeaways for Early-Career Ophthalmologists

- ▶ No. 1: Build your network. Seek mentors, connect with industry, and collaborate with peers.
- ▶ No. 2: Stay curious and proactive. Take charge of your career by asking questions and embracing opportunities.
- ▶ No. 3: Trust the process. Focus on growth and relationships during training.
- ▶ No. 4: Define your niche. Develop expertise in areas you are passionate about.
- ▶ No. 5: Lead with integrity. Treat mentors and colleagues with respect to shape long-term success.

Mentors also shared personal reflections. Emily Schehlein, MD, encouraged attendees to savor their training years: “Residency and fellowship were my favorite stages of my career. The connections I made then have shaped my life and career. I always tell mentees to trust the process and enjoy the journey.”

Gary Wörtz, MD, urged participants to define their passions and build their professional brand: “Focus on what excites you most and build expertise around it. Events like YMDC help refine your goals and connect you with mentors who can guide you.”

Judy E. Kim, MD, emphasized the importance of integrity and collaboration: “Raise your hand, speak up, and deliver results. Respect and compassion go a long way in building a successful career and leadership pathway” (Figure 5).

BUILDING LASTING CONNECTIONS

The networking reception that followed the mentorship rotations allowed attendees to solidify relationships and exchange ideas in an informal setting (Figure 6).

Eric Rosenberg, DO, highlighted the value of mentorship in shaping the field: “These events provide young ophthalmologists with platforms to connect, learn, and advance. They are essential for fostering the next generation of leaders.”

Dr. Wörtz recounted a moment of connection: “I introduced a young ophthalmologist to her hero in the field. Witnessing such eagerness to learn and grow is incredibly rewarding.”

Dr. Schehlein summed up the evening’s ethos: “Ophthalmology is a small field, making connections easier but also long-lasting. Be mindful, kind, and respectful; you’ll be working with these mentors and colleagues for decades.”

LOOKING AHEAD TO 2025

The success of the 2024 Capstone event reaffirms YMDC’s commitment to fostering mentorship and collaboration. The next YMDC Capstone event will take place at the 2025 AAO Annual Meeting in Orlando, Florida.

To stay connected and explore future opportunities, visit www.youngmdconnect.com. ■