WE ARE ALL SUPERHEROES

Take a moment to recognize the true power of eye care.

BY PHILIP S. GARZA, MD, MSC

I love superhero movies. I have probably watched more big-budget superhero films during residency than at any other time in my life, having learned that getting lost in a fantastical story for 2 or 3 hours leaves me feeling reinvigorated and ready to return to my clinical duties and other work. At first, I thought this was because the stories provided an escape from the mundane challenges of life as an ophthalmology resident. Only recently did I realize that I actually love superhero movies for the opposite reason: They remind me of the magic and power of the real work we do every day as eye surgeons.

THE PARALLELS BETWEEN SURGEONS AND SUPERHEROES

As a second-year resident, I began to perform cataract surgery for the first time, which means I began to experience that wonderful moment known to every cataract surgeon when the patient's eye patch is removed on postoperative day 1. I have seen the range of emotions my patients experience in that moment, including wonderment at the positive change their junior surgeon has brought to their lives with his own hands.

Take a moment to experience the wonderment for yourself. As cataract surgeons, we first apply a *magic potion* to make our patient's surgical experience nearly painless. We wield precision instruments to tear a circular hole in a microns-thick membrane and shoot a jet of water to separate the offending lens from its casing. We use our *magic wand*, a probe that oscillates at ultrasonic speed, to pulverize and remove the lens through a sub–3-mm incision. Finally, we deploy a precision-engineered implant that we have artfully selected using sophisticated formulas based on Gaussian optics or artificial intelligence. If all goes according to plan, the patient will see better than ever before, using his or her new *bionic eye*.

As surgeons, we like to say that modern cataract surgery is elegant. Let's be honest: It's unreal! Yes, we may just be regular people, but in the OR we expertly deploy technology that, just a century ago, was pure fantasy. In that way, we are all Bruce Wayne.

THE SUPERHUMAN DOCTOR: AN OLD IDEA

If this comparison—eye surgeon to superhero—seems over-dramatic, consider that the idea of the doctor as a superhuman healer is not a new one. The Rod of Asclepius, the symbol of our profession, belonged to the Greek god Asclepius, father of Hygieia and Panacea. As a medical student working at Grady Memorial in Atlanta, I found daily inspiration in a sculpture by Julian Hoke Harris that hangs across the street from the hospital. It depicts a physician wielding the Rod of Asclepius (actually depicted as a caduceus, but we can forgive the sculptor) as he turns back death with an outstretched arm and a resolute stare (Figure).

Courtesy of Robert M. Craig.

Figure. The concept of the doctor as a superhuman master over death is not new. In Julian Hoke Harris' sculpture "Keeping Back Death," a physician wields the Rod of Asclepius (depicted as a caduceus) to fend off the personification of death.

I find the concept of the doctor as a superhuman master over death particularly relevant to the work of glaucoma surgeons. Our enemy is a relentless scourge that is so otherworldly that it defies our attempts to define it. It holds our patients hostage, threatening to plunge them into permanent darkness. We are often able to turn back the darkness by applying a few *potions* or a single surgical maneuver. Unfortunately, much like Superman overcome by kryptonite, we are sometimes powerless to stop the disease as it renders a patient blind.

IT'S ABOUT HOPE

Of course, we know we are not demigods. We are not all-powerful. We are not perfect. Our humility is reinforced every time we cannot save a patient from blindness or we experience a surgical complication. But, when we take stock of the good we are able to do and recognize that our current abilities eclipse what was once considered impossible, we realize that what we most have to offer patients is hope. Even if we are unable to be the superhero that a patient needs today, we will keep working hard to improve ourselves and our technology so that maybe we will be tomorrow. ■

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