

Steve Charles, MD

Dr. Charles is the founder of the Charles Retina Institute in Memphis, one of the world's foremost retinal clinics, specializing in vitreoretinal diseases and surgery. The Institute is known internationally for its quality of care, surgical expertise, technology development, research, and teaching.

1. You are extremely involved in your community, with education and public service. Can you talk about your role?

My entire life I have felt that learning and working are not things you do to merely to finance a lifestyle. Unfortunately, many people feel like education is a pain they must endure to earn a bunch of money, so that they can buy meaningless objects. Working for me, however, is not a chore. I truly enjoy it for what it is and not for what it can earn me.

My father and grandfather were tireless, so I have a long history of being around people who appreciated learning and hard work. I find an intrinsic value in hard work and remaining educated. The last place in the world I am interested in going is on a cruise or to a casino; I would much rather be making a contribution.

For years, I have taken calls for the doctors in our group during the holidays. I see it like this; all of my children are grown and have moved away, I am single and would rather work on the holidays so that other people who are married and have young children can be at home with their families. I also volunteer this time because when I am frequently traveling throughout the year, these are the people taking calls for me. This is just one way for me to pay them back.

2. You have a reputation as a tireless worker. Can you talk about the pace of your life?

I work a 7-day week and do not take many breaks other than to visit my children and grandchildren or to go to the gym. My three daughters, two grandchildren, siblings, and friends are more important to me than anything else in my life; still, my work is a high priority. I have not had a vacation since 1996 and do not plan on taking one any time soon. I do, however, travel frequently to teach and attend conferences; I often manage to spend time with many great friends during these trips.

I check my e-mail throughout the night so that if someone on the other side of the world has a question about a surgery they are about to perform, I can answer it. I believe that is just a small contribution that I can make.

In addition to my lecturing opportunities, I perform approximately 16 surgical cases per week. I am also a mechanical and electrical engineer and have 50 patents and many applications. I have been involved in starting a number of companies—most of which have been acquired by Alcon (Fort Worth, Texas). I also work in surgical robotics for orthopedics, neurosurgery, and the spine, and I have a medical robotics company called MicroDexterity Systems (Albuquerque, New Mexico).

I started flying airplanes several years ago and am starting to get back into it as I travel around the country to attend medical and engineering meetings.

I guess I get my energy from my parents, but it is not like doing all of this is hard for me. I find it very rewarding.



3. Can you explain your passion for education?

I have operated in 25 countries. I have visited and taught in 30 countries, as well as almost every state in America. I really enjoy teaching—a trait I probably got from watching my father, who was a college professor, designer, sculptor, architect, and city planner. Teaching is both a thrill and privilege for me. I think it also keeps me fresh on the things I might not encounter in my daily practice.

I believe that teaching and education go hand in hand. When you are an educator, you open yourself up to questioning; it keeps you honest about what you know in regard to new research and technology.

Meetings and conferences are another important element of not becoming stagnant in your practice. Just reading the journals cannot replace the benefits of interacting with colleagues at meetings. I believe that interaction is a crucial component of education.

4. In what ways do your beliefs play out in the way you handle your practice?

I have always taken care of every patient, whether or not they have money. I try to be an aggressive advocate in convincing hospitals to accommodate patients. If a patient has only a portion of the money for a surgery, I will allow the hospital and anesthesiologist to split the fee and do the surgery for free. For more than 20 years, I have provided free transportation to patients who could not afford to get to the hospital or clinic.

Additionally, it is important for me to put as much money as possible back into research and development and helping others. I do not have expensive things and try to live frugally so that I can dedicate my resources to the endeavors that I feel are the most worthwhile.

I was brought up to believe that it is not about us. It is about trying to make life better for other folks while you are here. Giving to other people, whether it is a kind word, teaching, or a free surgery—THAT is true fulfillment.

5. You have obviously already achieved much in your life. What have you not yet done that you would like to accomplish in the future?

I would like to travel to Gothenburg, Sweden and Fishguard, Wales, where my parents' families are from. More important, though, I have a strong interest in human rights, especially women's rights and am opposed to war and capital punishment. I have a fair amount of knowledge in these areas and have done a tremendous amount of reading. Unfortunately, when it comes to these rights issues, I feel a bit helpless in how I can address them. I wish I could be more influential in these areas, but I am honestly not sure how to accomplish that. Until I figure that out, I will remain an educated voter and philanthropist. ■

STEVE CHARLES: FAST FACTS

- He is a mechanical and electrical engineer, has 48 patents, and has helped start several medical-device startup companies.
- He has been listed in *Best Doctors in America* and *Best Ophthalmologists in America* many times and has received the prestigious Wacker Medal from the Club Jules Gonin, and the first Founders Medal from the Vitreous Society.
- He was inducted into the University of Miami School of Medicine Medical Alumni Association Hall of Fame.