

FELLOWS' FOCUS

THROUGH THE EYES OF THE RESEARCH FELLOW



Here's how these former and current fellows got their start—and what it took to get to where they are now.

BY ROSELIND NI, BS; TURNER D. WIBBELSMAN, MD; BITA MOMENAEI, MD; RAZIYEH MAHMOUDZADEH, MD; AND JASON HSU, MD

Dedicating time to research opens doors for fostering connections, growing careers, and gaining new skills and knowledge, but it also presents new challenges. Research has become an increasingly important factor in residency applications and can help fellows determine whether they want to pursue an academic career. There are many considerations to keep in mind when deciding to participate in research. Here, three current or former Wills Eye research fellows—Turner D. Wibbelsman, MD; Raziyeḥ Mahmoudzadeh, MD; and Bitā Momenaei, MD—share their journeys to success and offer advice for those considering the research fellowship path.

ROSELIND NI, BS: WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO PURSUE A RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP, AND HOW HAS IT AFFECTED YOUR CAREER TRAJECTORY?

Dr. Mahmoudzadeh: I discovered my passion for research early in medical school, starting with bench research, then transitioning to clinical research. I realized that research made my day-to-day work more meaningful, pushed me to stay up to date on the rapidly expanding knowledge in ophthalmology, and helped me explore the unknowns within the field of medicine. My passion for clinical research grew during residency in Iran (my home country), and I recognized the need to broaden my experiences to design and conduct higher-quality research. I saw the retina research fellowship as an opportunity to deepen my skills and further explore how to address important clinical questions. After meeting with US mentors at international conferences, I decided to further my expertise in the United States.

Dr. Wibbelsman's Advice: "It is well-understood that dedicated time for research prolongs the completion of training. Regardless, view the opportunity as time on, rather than time off. Research allows you to connect with mentors, learn about the field, and hone technical research skills; most importantly, the product of the work is a contribution to advancing the field and improving the lives of our patients."

Dr. Momenaei: I became interested in research during my residency in Iran and found it incredibly rewarding. However, in Iran, we did not have access to electronic health records or the ability to conduct large-scale data research. This motivated me to pursue a research fellowship in the United States. At Wills Eye Hospital, I now have the privilege of collaborating with leading experts who serve as valuable resources and mentors. Having access to large-scale data allows me to engage in comprehensive data analysis and contribute to impactful research projects. I have deepened my understanding of how to refine research questions, found novel ways to approach complex problems analytically, and improved my teamwork and multitasking skills. Additionally, attending and presenting at meetings offers excellent opportunities to network and stay informed about advancements at other research centers.

Dr. Wibbelsman: As an undergraduate student pursuing medical school, I saw clinical research as an avenue to learn

INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH FELLOW PERSPECTIVES

"I arrived in Philadelphia for my research fellowship on the first day of the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. On top of the pandemic restrictions, I had to learn to navigate life in a different country and adapt to a new research setting. One of the biggest challenges I faced was working through the Visa process. I wanted to get my green card before applying to residency—I knew how difficult it would be to match without one. My advice is to be persistent and adaptable. The process made me more resilient and resourceful."

— *Raziyeh Mahmoudzadeh, MD*

"Securing a Visa required traveling to neighboring countries for US embassy appointments. Leaving behind my family and an established career to start anew in the United States was a significant challenge. Overcoming these obstacles reaffirmed that sacrifices are often necessary to achieve ambitious goals. My advice is to find your passion, stay focused, and give your absolute best effort. Believe in yourself and your ability to navigate the journey—each step will bring you closer to where you want to be."

— *Bitia Momenaei, MD*

about and contribute to the health care field. I was curious about the technical and logistical aspects of conducting high-quality research and worked as a research assistant in college. When I became interested in ophthalmology as a career, I decided to pursue a research position in the field between undergraduate and medical school. During my research year, I worked with forward-thinking senior trainees and attending mentors. Having this experience early in my medical career provided me with a focused and intentional approach to the rest of my training.

MS. NI: WHAT WERE YOUR GOALS GOING INTO THE RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP, AND WHAT ARE THEY NOW?

Dr. Mahmoudzadeh: During my research fellowship, one of my goals was to refine my ability to design and conduct meaningful clinical studies. I wanted to address practical questions that could improve patient outcomes, particularly in retinal surgery. Another goal was to expand my skills in data analysis and manuscript writing to ensure that my research would have a lasting effect. Research has inspired me to pursue academic ophthalmology. Now, my primary goal is to combine patient care with research to continue answering clinical questions and developing innovative solutions. I also hope to mentor future ophthalmologists.

Dr. Momenaei: I have focused on learning how to develop a new study idea and see it to completion, work with large-scale data, and refine my analytical and problem-solving skills. Another goal was to better understand evidence-based ophthalmology. Additionally, I have prioritized mentoring medical students interested in ophthalmology, guiding them in research, and helping them engage with the field. I am applying to ophthalmology residency with plans to pursue a retina fellowship after. My long-term goal is to integrate clinical practice with research in academic medicine and combine patient care with innovation and education. I am passionate about mentoring and advancing the field through collaboration and participation in clinical trials.

Dr. Wibbelsman: When I began my research fellowship, I had relatively little knowledge of clinical ophthalmology. After absorbing as much information as possible in the first few months, I set a goal of leading my own projects from start to finish. Under the guidance of my mentors, I was able to devise my own study concepts and execute these projects. This invaluable process provided me with much-needed experience with every step of the research process. As an ophthalmology resident, I now lead medical students on several of my projects, teaching them about ophthalmology and clinical research. My long-term goal is to have an academic career dedicated to patient care and advancement through clinical research. ■

ROSELIND NI, BS

- Research Fellow, Wills Eye Hospital Retina Service, Philadelphia
- Medical Student, Sidney Kimmel Medical College, Thomas Jefferson University, Philadelphia
- niroselind@gmail.com
- Financial disclosure: None

TURNER D. WIBBLESMAN, MD

- PGY-2 Resident, Wills Eye Hospital Retina Service, Philadelphia
- Financial disclosure: None

BITIA MOMENAEI, MD

- Research Fellow, Wills Eye Hospital Retina Service, Philadelphia
- Financial disclosure: None

RAZIYEH MAHMOUDZADEH, MD

- Resident, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond
- Financial disclosure: None

JASON HSU, MD

- Co-Director of Retina Research and Professor of Ophthalmology, Thomas Jefferson University, Wills Eye Physicians-Mid-Atlantic Retina, Philadelphia
- Editorial Advisory Board Member, *Retina Today*
- Financial disclosure: Consultant (Astellas, Bausch + Lomb, Gyroscope, OccuRx); Grant Support (Adverum, Aldeyra Therapeutics, Astellas, Genentech/Roche, Novartis, Regeneron, Regeneron, Stealth Biotherapeutics)