

# Julia Haller, MD

Dr. Haller was recently appointed as the Professor and Chair of Ophthalmology at Thomas Jefferson University and Thomas Jefferson University Hospital. She is also Ophthalmologist in Chief at Wills Eye Institute.

## 1. What do you hope your work will accomplish in the future?

My hope is to leave the Wills Eye Institute as strong a place as it is today and to find new ways to make it greater. Retired hockey player Wayne Gretzky used to say that he tried to skate to where the puck was going to be next. The challenge of anyone in leadership is to figure out where the "puck" is going to be in the future and then position ourselves to get there.

Wills Eye Institute is the first and oldest eye hospital in the country. We have trained more ophthalmologists than any other eye program in the country, so we have a wonderful heritage here. It will be my goal to take the wonderful heritage that has been so well established and figure out how we can improve upon it. That includes finding out where we can make investments to ensure that we stay at the very top.

## 2. What do you think are the greatest challenges that retinal surgeons face in the coming year?

Because we do not have a subspecialty certification, retinal surgeons sometimes face difficulty in communicating the added value of being seen by a specialist. There are also increasing financial pressures placed on anyone in medicine who is attempting to perform research and make academic and clinical contributions.

Additionally, as industry remains on the forefront of many innovations we see in medicine, we face the challenge of working with them in a responsible and ethical way. I have been disturbed to see that there has been a tendency for some physicians to swing from one extreme to the other. For example, a recent article in *The New York Times* described various physicians who had given up on having any relationship with industry. I think that a move this drastic is a mistake; when you are not involved on any level you lose your chance to impact any of the exciting work occurring in industry. On the other hand, it is important to avoid the perception or reality of being in industry's back pocket. This is truly a difficult path to navigate.

## 3. What do you see as an important ophthalmic issue for women in the field?

Although there are more women in ophthalmology, we

are still not well represented in leadership roles, whether at the senior level of academic institutions or at the leadership level in private practices and organizations.

It is important for women involved in our field to mentor other women, and perhaps address some of the subtle discouragements that may keep women from seeking leadership roles.

## 4. As a woman in leadership, what advice would you offer to someone who is interested in assuming a leadership role?

I would encourage people to find areas that they are passionate about and to commit themselves to organizations that promote those interests. Then work hard and actively seek leadership opportunities.

A dean at Johns Hopkins once pointed out to me that there seem to be cultural factors that keep women from clearly expressing their interest in leadership opportunities and going after them aggressively. They tend to be hesitant or modest. Instead of saying, "I am perfect for this position, and I am really interested in it," as most men would do, a women

might indirectly express her interest by saying something like, "that sounds like a great opportunity." The search committee, however, will not pick up on those cues and may not understand what she is really saying.

We have a lot of cultural "reprogramming" that we need to do, among our other challenges.

## 5. How do you maintain a balance in your life?

I am flattered that you think I maintain balance in my life—it does not always seem that way to me. I try to look at other men and women whose life-work balance I admire and take as many tips from them as I possibly can. I also have tremendous help from my husband and my family. Additionally, my colleagues at work have been wonderful. Although Wills Eye Institute was established long ago, it is very forward-looking in terms of supporting families. For instance, my son is currently a senior playing his last season of high school lacrosse, and his team is ranked No. 1 in the nation. Although I have missed a number of meetings and functions, including dinner with a senator, everyone here has fully supported my commitment to attending all of his games. ■

