

# FELLOWS' FOCUS

## STARTING RETINA FELLOWSHIP: FOUR STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS



Make the most of this pivotal time in your retina career.

BY JUSTIN C. MUSTE, MD, AND DAVID FELL, MD

**T**ransitioning from residency to retina fellowship marks an exciting and demanding phase of your career. It's a time of rapid growth, technical mastery, and intellectual challenge, where you lay the framework for your professional growth well into the future.

With this in mind, we offer four strategies to help ensure success as you begin your fellowship journey.

### STRATEGY NO. 1: LEARN LIKE A BEGINNER AGAIN

Much like the beginning of residency, there will be frustrating times in fellowship when you fail at tasks you feel you should have mastered already, and other times when knowledge and technical skill come together seamlessly. Stay humble and lean into the feeling that you are starting all over again in a positive way. Try to avoid getting frustrated, and learn to take small wins as they come.

Ask questions—and lots of them. Observe how each attending approaches the same case differently. Reflect after every clinic and surgery on what went well and what could be improved upon. Resist the urge to rush toward autonomy; instead, focus on deliberate learning.

Approaching each day with curiosity and plenty of patience for yourself can only help to smooth the inevitably rocky learning process.

### STRATEGY NO. 2: BUILD SYSTEMS EARLY

Fellowship can feel like a whirlwind of clinic notes, surgical cases, research projects, and lectures. A strong organizational system will protect your time and sanity.

Use a consistent task-tracking method—whether digital or paper—to capture to-dos as soon as they arise. Block protected time for note review, case preparation, and research tasks each week. Keep a concise surgical log from

day 1. Small daily habits prevent chaos later, especially when you're juggling multiple attendings' schedules and clinical sites.

Record and review your (and your attendings') cases. You never know when valuable learnings will come up unexpectedly during surgeries, and reviewing last week's cases will always make you more prepared for the week ahead.

### STRATEGY NO. 3: PROTECT YOUR ENERGY AND PERSPECTIVE

At some point in your training, you will hear the cliché: "Fellowship is a marathon, not a sprint." And there is truth to that; fellowship years are intense. It's easy to let the inertia of the day to day carry you forward and build a routine that resembles sleep, work, sleep, work, etc. But remember, the clock keeps ticking on your life outside of work as well.

With this in mind, schedule small, non-negotiable routines to help keep your life full outside the clinic, such as exercise, meals with friends, time outdoors, or even a hobby unrelated to medicine. Factoring such activities into your schedule will give you time and perspective away from work to reset, refresh, and come back stronger.

Maintaining your mental and physical health doesn't detract from your training; it enhances it by keeping you sharp, compassionate, and resilient.

### STRATEGY NO. 4: CHOOSE RESEARCH PROJECTS THAT WILL TEACH YOU SOMETHING

As a fellow, you'll likely have more opportunity to participate in research than you did in medical school and residency, but you'll have far less time. Consider selecting opportunities that deepen your understanding of retinal disease and clinical decision making. Seek out a mentor

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## NEW PODCAST! THE FELLOW EYE: EPISODE 4



— NEW RETINA RADIO —  
**THE FELLOW EYE**

Co-hosts David Fell, MD, and Justin C. Muste, MD, sit down with Allen C. Ho, MD, and Curtis Heisel, MD, MBA, to discuss the gene therapy landscape in retina and how fellows can get involved.

who can advise on feasibility and offer suggestions on who to work with. Perhaps you could write about a unique complication, present a case you found interesting, or investigate the outcomes of a procedure that did not go quite so well. In an increasingly AI- and data-driven world, you could focus on studies that teach you practical skills such as data analysis, imaging interpretation, or surgical outcomes assessment.

Finally, you could seek out a research project that is designed to help you narrow down an area of interest or set you up to pursue another fellowship.

It's important to set realistic goals: One or two well-executed papers or presentations are more valuable than many unfinished abstracts. To echo the above points, focus on honing the process—design, data collection, writing—so you can carry those skills forward into your career.

### FORM GOOD, SUSTAINABLE HABITS

Fellowship is a time to transform from a competent resident into a confident, thoughtful retina specialist. The growth will be fast, but not always linear, and it will certainly continue beyond fellowship. Approach each challenge with the right mindset; remember, you are just a few years away from being solo and relying on the professional habits you've built to sustain you. ■

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