5 Questions with Andrew Lam, MD

Andrew Lam, MD, is a partner with New England Retina Consultants in Springfield, Massachusetts, and an Assistant Professor of Ophthalmology at Tufts University School of Medicine.

1. You studied history at Yale as an undergraduate student. What compelled you to change fields of study from history to medicine?

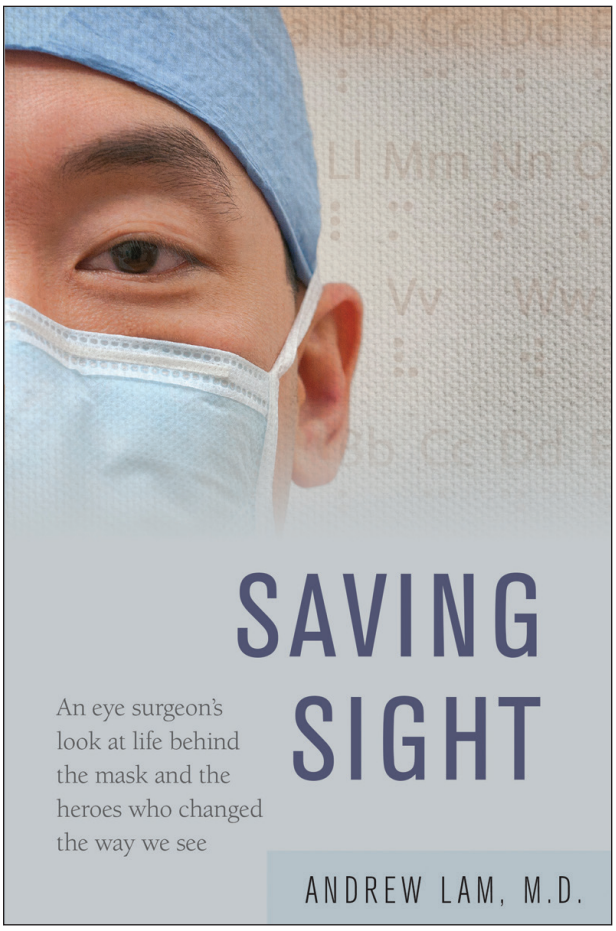
Looking back, I think I probably always knew I would go to medical school and become a doctor. I liked helping people and I'd seen how gratifying being a physician could be because my dad was an interventional cardiologist. He loved his job. At the same time, I knew that college would be a wonderful opportunity to study my favorite subject—history—before pursuing a medical career. That's why I majored in it.

2. You have published 2 books despite your busy schedule as a full-time retina specialist. How do you find time to write?

I get asked this a lot and do not have a great answer, except that, when you are passionate about something, you just make time. I love sharing historical stories that deserve to be better known. I wrote my novel *Two Sons of China* because I wanted more people to know about the Americans who served in China during World War II. I wrote *Saving Sight: An Eye Surgeon's Look at Life Behind the Mask and the Heroes Who Changed the Way We See* because I wanted to shine a light on the heroes of ophthalmology whose inventions have saved the sight of millions around the world. Their biographies have all the elements of a blockbuster movie: courage, defeat, serendipity, and perseverance. I make time to write, revise, edit, or brainstorm whenever I can. This might be between cases in the OR, during my kids' sports practices, or after they have gone to bed.

3. In *Saving Sight*, you examine the lives of some of ophthalmology's heroes. Which of those biographies did you find most compelling?

The book includes profiles of Sir Harold Ridley (inventor of the intraocular lens); Charles Kelman, MD (inventor of phacoemulsification); Charles Schepens, MD (father of modern retina surgery); Arnall Patz, MD (discoverer of the damaging effect of high oxygen therapy in neonates); Judah Folkman, MD (a founder of angiogenesis research); Louis Braille (inventor of braille); and the inventors of LASIK. Of these, I have found the stories of Dr. Ridley, Dr. Kelman, and Louis Braille to resonate the most with readers.



Dr. Ridley invented the intraocular lens after seeing inert Plexiglass embedded in the eyes of a downed Royal Air Force pilot during World War II, but his achievement

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unequivocally ruined his career because he was ridiculed and ostracized by many of his peers. This caused him to sink into a deep depression. Dr. Kelman had an epiphany at his dentist's office when he realized the ultrasonic probe being used to clean his teeth might also emulsify a cataract. But he, too, endured years of setbacks and mockery in his quest to perfect phacoemulsification. Louis Braille was only 15 years old when he invented his tactile dot system for the blind, but he struggled his entire life to spread its use and failed miserably. When he died at age 43 in 1852, he was completely unknown. All the heroes in the book suffered personally for their newfangled ideas.

4. In addition to biography, *Saving Sight* provides an inside look at being an eye surgeon though personal anecdotes. Why did you decide to include this memoir aspect to the book?

When I first proposed a new book about these medical innovators to my agent, she was not interested. She did not think readers outside of the medical sphere would buy a book about the history of ophthalmology, so I knew I had to do something more, something unique, to draw readers in and get them to pick up the book. That's when I decided to blend the historical stories with my own experiences as a resident-in-training and as a practicing retina surgeon—to reveal a gritty, unflinching look at what it's like to be in the OR trying to save sight, what it's like to face difficult complications, and what it's like to fail. And I'm sure this honesty about what being a surgeon is really like is what has helped the book succeed thus far.

5. Every author has a long list of those who inspired him or her. Please tell our readers about a few of those authors and how they influenced your career as an ophthalmologist-writer.

As an historical novelist, I have been influenced by the works of Herman Wouk, Ken Follett, and Jeff Shaara. I love books that present history in an exciting and entertaining way. My favorite nonfiction writers of history are David McCullough and Doris Kearns Goodwin. I might add that, as an historically minded resident and fellow, I was lucky to train at Wills Eye Hospital. This was partly because of Wills' own rich history, but mainly because I had mentors there such as William Tasman, MD, and William Benson, MD, who also appreciated history. These 2 mentors had many stories to tell from their long careers and always encouraged me to pursue interests outside of ophthalmology. Over the years, I think I have spoken with them about history more than retina, which is really saying something. ■