



AKSHAY THOMAS, MD, MS

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**Please share with us your background.**

I was born in Palm Springs, California, but lived in India between the ages of 7 and 19. My parents gave me a wonderful childhood, and I can hardly remember a time growing up when I didn't have a fresh bump, bruise, or scrape from playing cricket with the neighborhood kids.

When did you first know that you wanted to become a retina specialist?

While in medical school, Lawrence J. Singerman, MD, FACS, and Rishi P. Singh, MD, gave me the opportunity to be involved in some of their research endeavors. This was my first exposure to the field of vitreoretinal surgery and was an important experience that helped to shape my decision to become a retina specialist.

During residency at the Casey Eye Institute in Portland, Oregon, I found diagnosing and managing ocular inflammatory and retinal diseases to be the most challenging but interesting. I also found myself going back to things I had learned in internal medicine and diagnosing systemic disease based on ocular findings. Watching retina specialists like Phoebe Lin, MD, PhD, take on some of the most complicated medical and surgical cases in our field with calmness, kindness, and composure solidified vitreoretinal surgery and uveitis as my career choice.

Who are your mentors?

In Portland, Andreas K. Lauer, MD, instilled very early on the importance of humility and prioritizing family and personal well-being. Dr. Lin, Eric B. Suhler, MD, MPH, and James T. Rosenbaum, MD, piqued my interest in uveitis during residency and taught me so much of what I know about ocular immunology and inflammation during my uveitis fellowship. My mentors in Portland are practically family, and I continue to seek their advice years later.

During my fellowship at Duke, I was so fortunate to learn not just about vitreoretinal surgery but the importance of inquisitiveness, innovation, and persistence to move our field forward. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my mentors at Duke: Glenn J. Jaffe, MD; Cynthia A. Toth, MD; Sharon Fekrat, MD, FACS, FASRS; Eric A. Postel, MD; Lejla Vajzovic, MD, FASRS; Tamer H. Mahmoud, MD, PhD; and Dilraj S. Grewal, MD, FASRS.

Post-fellowship, my partners in practice have fostered my growth as a surgeon, and my peers have given me opportunities to contribute to our field through research, advocacy, and society memberships.

Describe your current position.

I work at Tennessee Retina as a vitreoretinal surgeon and uveitis specialist. I am fortunate to work alongside 10 other retina specialists in my practice as well as rheumatologists, oncologists, neurologists, infectious disease specialists, and gastroenterologists, with whom I comanage uveitis patients.

What has been the most memorable experience of your career thus far?

As physicians, we have the great responsibility and opportunity to care for other human beings during some of the most vulnerable moments of their lives. I began caring for a young mother with bilateral chronic panuveitis who had never seen a uveitis specialist previously due to many socioeconomic factors. She confided that her vision had been poor for so long that she didn't know what her 2-year-old looked like. After close to a year of treatment involving surgery and both local and systemic immunosuppressive therapy, she brought in a drawing she had made of her youngest child. That has to be my best moment in medicine so far.

What advice can you offer to individuals who are just now choosing their career paths after finishing fellowship?

Stay humble and stay hungry. The perfect job may not exist, but you can work to make it better for both you and the next person who joins your practice. Don't be afraid to stick your neck out if you have a new idea. Not all of us can simultaneously be an A+ clinician, researcher, parent, and spouse. Decide early on what your limits and priorities are. ■

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