

Bascom Palmer's ER is in good hands

James T. Banta, M.D.

For James T. Banta, M.D., the appeal of emergency medicine came early in his residency training. Banta, assistant professor of ophthalmology at Bascom Palmer Eye Institute, is a comprehensive ophthalmologist, and medical director of Bascom Palmer's ER – the Institute's Emergency Services Department.

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On average, Bascom Palmer's emergency department in Miami sees 40 to 50 patients a day and as many as 15,000 each year, not including consultations for patients at Ryder Trauma Center or Jackson Memorial Hospital.

Banta received his bachelor of science degree from the University of Oklahoma and his medical degree from the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center. In 2003, he completed his residency in ophthalmology at Bascom Palmer.

“The ER is an important part of the Institute's residency training,” he says. “It covers an incredibly wide spectrum of eye problems, from the relatively simple like conjunctivitis, to the more severe like open globe injuries. Our ER covers a geographic territory that spans Florida, the Caribbean, Latin America and South America. The extent and severity of cases we see on a regular basis is unparalleled anywhere in the country.”

“It's very exciting,” he says. “You have no idea what will come through the door.”

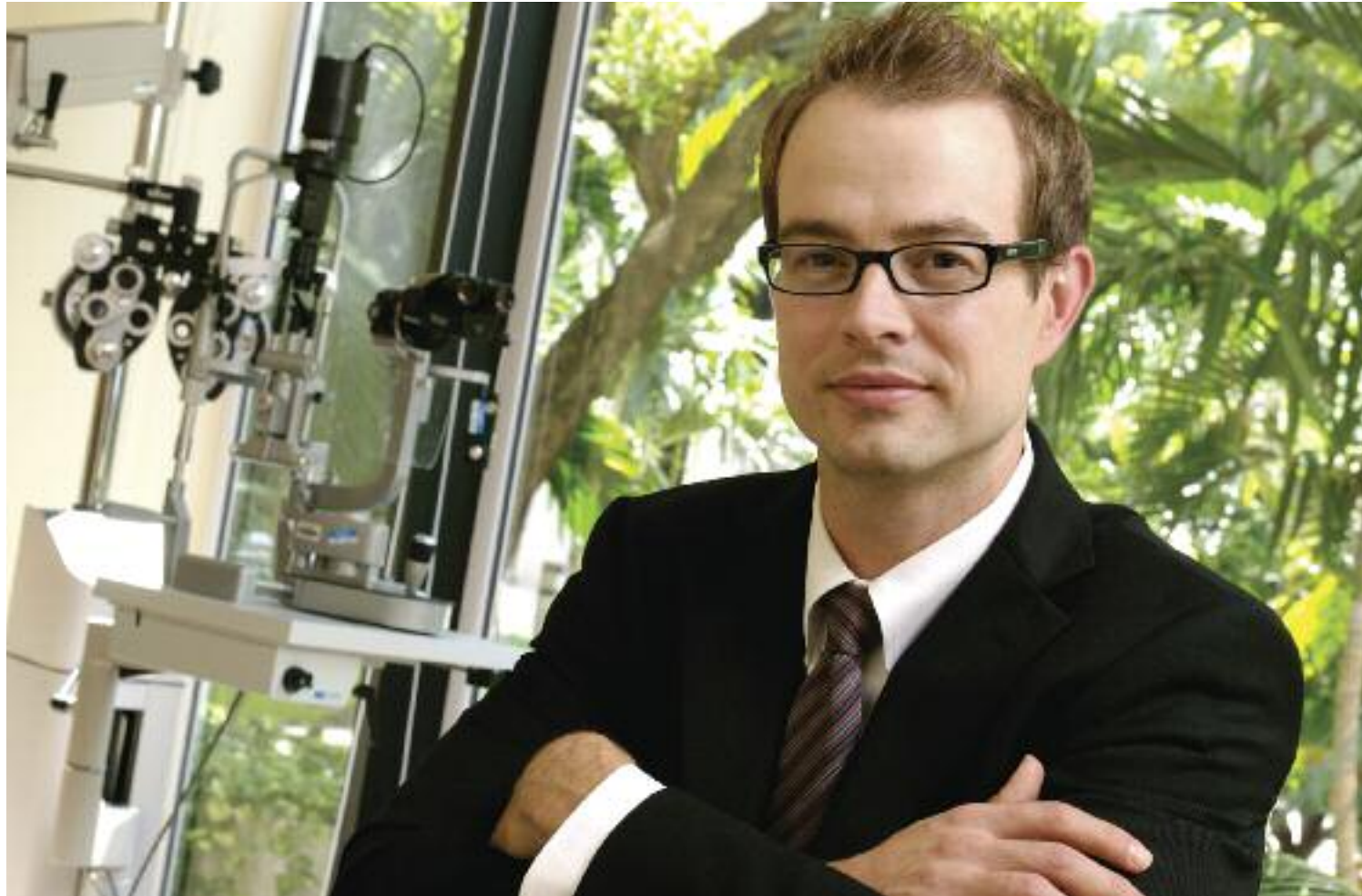
But for all the workplace-related and traumatic ocular injuries, the most common diagnosis in the emergency room, according to Banta, is contact lens-related corneal ulcers, which are open sores on the cornea. These are usually the result of sleeping in contact lenses, not changing or cleaning lenses or lens cases adequately, or wearing cosmetic or costume non-prescription lenses. Resulting sores can be severely devastating and may lead to corneal scarring and vision loss.

Banta has also observed a recent increase in paint ball injuries, a result of a battle game where players shoot at each other using compressed-gas guns filled with paint capsules. Most paint ball injuries do not occur at regulated, commercial facilities (which mandate the full-time use of eye protection), but with unregulated, unsupervised recreational use.

“If everyone would take care of their contact lenses appropriately and wear the proper eye protection for high-risk activities, both at work and at home, our emergency department would be far less busy,” Banta muses. “At a minimum, 2mm polycarbonate safety glasses should be worn for all activities at risk for projectile injury, particularly lawn work, grinding, cutting, and hammering. Polycarbonate goggles are even safer.”

In 2007, Banta completed a three-year project, publishing *Ocular Trauma*, a 240-page comprehensive guide on ocular trauma, ranging from chemical and blast injuries, to perforating injuries. The book, he says, was a collaboration with approximately 20 residents, fellows and attending physicians, all but one of whom trained at Bascom Palmer. It has been translated into multiple languages.

“Because we see so many interesting and unique cases, I wanted to share our experience with others,” says Banta. The clinically-based book includes numerous case studies and hundreds of photographs and illustrations.



While the ER occupies about 20 percent of his time, Banta is largely focused on his comprehensive ophthalmology practice, with an emphasis on cataracts and cataract surgery. “The comprehensive ophthalmology service provides complete initial evaluations, as well as long-term care for patients with chronic eye conditions. We see everybody and everything.” Banta adds, “Comprehensive ophthalmology is often the foot in the door.”

Banta has also seen significant changes in cataract surgery since he first began performing it nine years ago. In particular, he points to the manner and speed with which the surgery is performed. “Everything keeps getting smaller,” he says, referring to the incision size (down to 2.2 millimeters from 3.2 millimeters less than 10 years ago). “The evolving technology associated with cataract surgery is simply amazing and continues to improve the efficiency and safety profile of the surgery.”

Another promising development in cataract surgery is the wide assortment of intraocular lenses that are now available for patients. New technology has produced lenses that can reduce imperfections in the cornea, and even correct certain types of astigmatism. Patient expectations, he says, “are higher than ever.”

“We continue to strive toward the goal of reducing the need for glasses after surgery,” he says. “It’s not a perfect science, but it’s moving in that direction.” About 90 percent of Banta’s cataract patients have normal, age-related cataracts. The balance are exceptional cases, including cataracts that are the result of trauma or glaucoma, and very young children whose eyes require a different approach to cataract surgery.

“Cataract surgery is my favorite thing,” he says. “It requires intense concentration and an awareness of everything that is happening. You are working in an extremely small space; it is a meticulous science.” He is currently involved in a clinical trial to determine the best timing to measure patients for intraocular lens implants. By repeating measurements at different points and studying varying outcomes, Banta and his colleagues hope to determine the optimum time to do an intraocular lens power calculation to achieve the patient’s best possible outcome.

Despite a demanding schedule, Banta recently took time to join a team of fellow ophthalmologists from Bascom Palmer and traveled to Haiti to help the many victims of January’s massive earthquake. While there, he cared for some 250 patients in a makeshift hospital, including dressing wounds and administering IV fluids. “The extent of devastation visited upon the people of Haiti is difficult to describe,” he says. “Rebuilding will be a long and arduous process, but the outpouring of aid and volunteerism I saw there was heartwarming and will eventually give way to a new, improved Haiti.”

When he’s not at Bascom Palmer, Banta enjoys fly fishing, though as an Oklahoma native, he had to transition from freshwater fly fishing to saltwater. When time permits, he kickboxes, something he calls a “great stress reliever.”