

Pediatric Ophthalmologist is Institute's First Female Hispanic Professor Hilda Capó, M.D.

Hilda Capó, M.D.'s, leadership isn't limited to the field of ophthalmology, where she specializes in childhood amblyopia and strabismus in children and adults. She's also a leader among professional Hispanic women. She's been named the GEMS International Woman of the Year for Medical Sciences, and the Latin Club of America's Latino of the Year.

In 2002, when she was named Bascom Palmer's professor of clinical ophthalmology, Capó also became the institute's first female Hispanic professor. "I am so proud to be the first Hispanic female professor, and only the third female professor at Bascom Palmer," she says. "It makes me feel good to know that I may be a role model. It lets young girls know they can do so much today."

Capó, who has three children of her own, is passionate about working with Bascom Palmer's youngest patients. About 70 percent of her practice is devoted to children. Adults with strabismus, or cross-eyes, make up the balance of her patients.

Capó's interest in ophthalmology surfaced early in her medical training when she realized the field offered her the opportunity to combine surgery and medicine to treat patients of all ages. Surgery, she says, is particularly rewarding. "With surgery, you can create a change. You can change a person's vision." Capó finds Bascom Palmer's mix of patient's ages and eye disorders stimulating.

In addition to the thousands of patients she's treated in Miami, she has treated patients in some of the world's poorest communities, like Trujillo, Peru. Two years ago, as part of Project ORBIS, she traveled with a team from Bascom Palmer to the Peruvian community where she spent a week lecturing to medical school residents, evaluating patients, performing surgery, and providing input on issues including clinic design and fundraising for improved vision care.

"We saw and helped treat children with severe cases of eye disease. It was extremely rewarding work," she says. Since her visit to Peru, two of the ophthalmologists she helped train have spent time at Bascom Palmer, learning additional techniques and observing patient care. "We're offering help for long lasting change," she says. "We're doing something of great value."

Capó received her medical degree from the University of Puerto Rico School of Medicine, and completed her residency in the school's Department of Ophthalmology. She completed a fellowship in neuro-ophthalmology at New York University Medical Center and a fellowship in pediatric ophthalmology and strabismus at Wilmer Ophthalmological Institute at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. She joined Bascom Palmer in 1989.

Children who visit her clinic undergo a comprehensive evaluation including a motility examination to determine if their eyes are properly aligned, and whether there is any muscle dysfunction. Most often, Capó diagnoses amblyopia (lazy eye) or strabismus (cross-eyes). For patients with amblyopia, she generally prescribes treatment that involves a combination of eye patch and eye drops to strengthen the lazy eye muscle. For children with strabismus, patching or glasses are usually sufficient. However, in cases where more treatment is needed, Capó performs muscle surgery to loosen or tighten the problematic muscle and realign the eyes. The procedure takes approximately one hour, and has a success rate of about 85 percent.

Surgery for strabismus is most successful, she says, when performed early on to establish binocularity, the ability to focus on an object with both eyes and create a single image.

"I wouldn't practice ophthalmology anywhere else. Bascom Palmer has resources, like the most advanced diagnostic and ancillary testing equipment, that no place else has. Our patients and their parents get near-immediate results."



Capó stresses the importance of early visual screening for children. “Many conditions can be treated with good results.”

In her clinic, Capó sees children and adults. One weekday morning is reserved for Botox injections, not for cosmetic purposes, but to help control spasms in adults that can lead to involuntary contractions that may close one or both eyes. By injecting the eye and cheek area with Botox, which was first used by ophthalmologists to treat strabismus, Capó says the spasms generally can be controlled.

This fall, Capó will begin work on a clinical trial testing the effectiveness of eye exercises to treat convergence insufficiency. Children and adults with the disorder are unable to focus on an object as it comes closer in their vision. The eyes of patients with convergence insufficiency tend to drift outward, rather than inward, when an object approaches. While exercises appear to be the most effective means for treating the disorder, the trial is intended to determine which exercises or combination of exercises, over what period of time, are most effective for treatment.

She recently participated in the national, multicenter Amblyopia Treatment Trial Studies comparing the effectiveness of patching and drops to treat amblyopia. Final study results are currently being assessed.

For parents, Capó stresses the importance of early visual screening. “So many conditions can be treated and have good outcomes.” For cases where vision cannot fully be restored however, she says Bascom Palmer’s specialists are uniquely trained to guide and support young patients to adjust to their condition. “It’s amazing to see how these children adapt,” she says. “If we treat and guide them, they are able to handle it.” Most of these patients, she adds, are mainstreamed into regular classrooms and go on to be very successful in life.

When she isn’t on a patient schedule, Capó is typically juggling the schedules of her three children, ages 6, 10 and 12. Those schedules include swim meets, Girl Scouts, tennis and soccer games and homework. “The kids keep me running around.”

Once they’re grown, Capó hopes to have the opportunity to travel internationally and share her skills in South American countries. “I hope to lecture and teach in communities where there is a real need for ophthalmology.”