

Interaction with patients and training new ophthalmologists is highly rewarding for oculoplastic surgeon

# Thomas E. Johnson, M.D.

When Thomas E. Johnson, M.D., professor of clinical ophthalmology at Bascom Palmer Eye Institute, completed his fellowship in ophthalmic pathology at Pacific Presbyterian Medical Center in San Francisco, California, he learned about an

opportunity that would allow him to combine his love for travel with his chosen field of study.

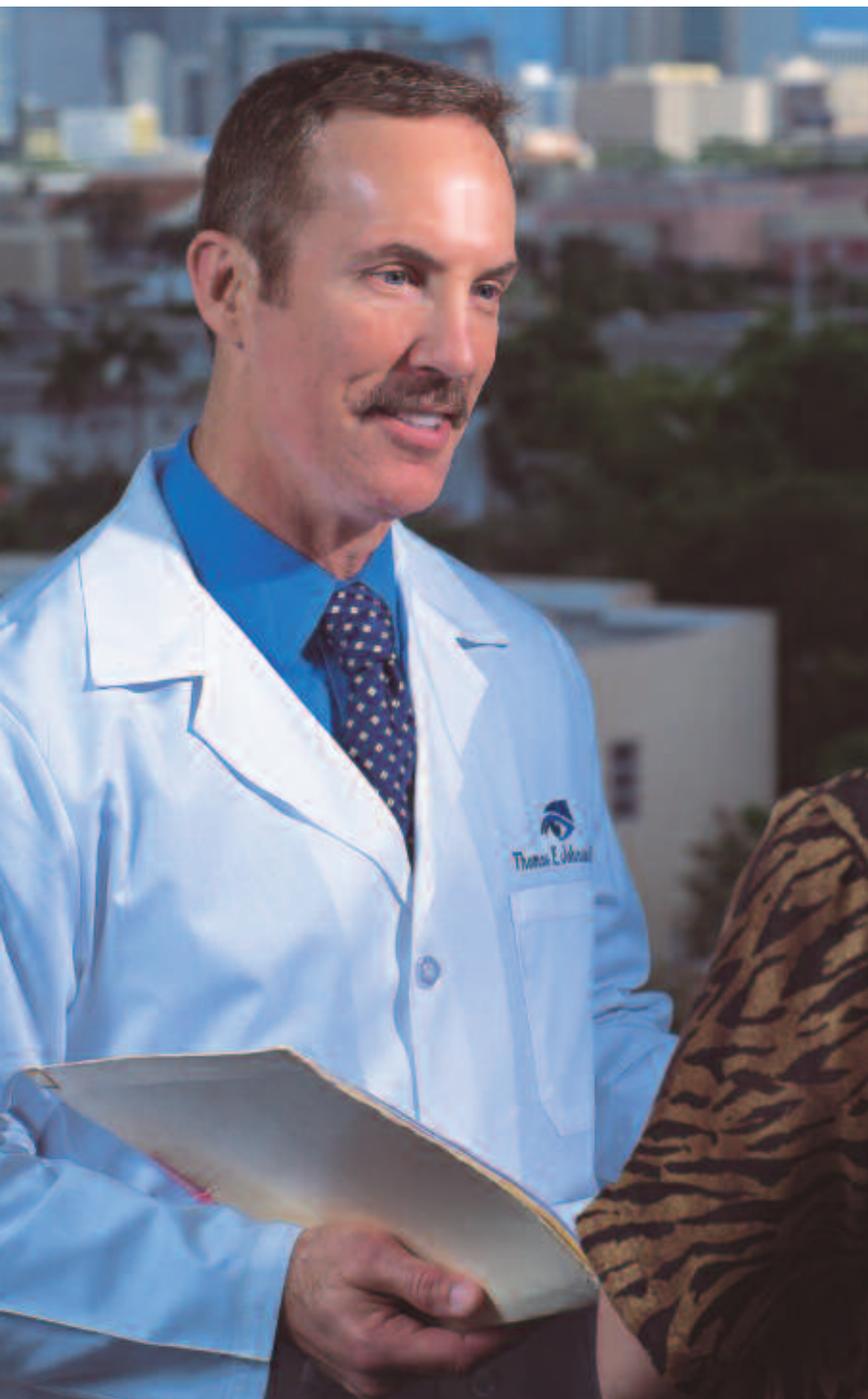
Johnson applied for a fellowship in ophthalmic plastic and reconstructive surgery at King Khaled Eye Specialist Hospital in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia. Accepted into the program, he prepared for what he thought would be a year or two in the Middle East.

“I liked it so much I stayed for six years,” he says. “I worked with people from all over the world. We did a tremendous amount of surgery and saw quite a bit of pathology.” In addition, Johnson traveled all over the Middle East, Asia and Africa.

Ironically, had it not been for his time in Saudi Arabia, Johnson would not be at Bascom Palmer today. But, when David T. Tse, M.D., professor of ophthalmology and ophthalmic plastic and reconstructive surgery specialist at Bascom Palmer, came to the country to deliver a lecture at a conference, the two doctors crossed paths and became friends. Eventually, Tse invited Johnson to join Bascom Palmer.

“I never thought I’d live in this part of the country,” says Johnson, who completed a fellowship in ophthalmic plastic and reconstructive surgery at the institute, and today is a professor in the oculoplastics service. “I really like working here, and I work with excellent faculty. At Bascom Palmer, I can do everything I’ve always wanted to do. We evaluate and manage many patients with unique and complicated cases.”

It was during medical school at the University of Iowa College of Medicine that Johnson first developed an interest in the field of ophthalmology. “In medical school, I completed an ophthalmology rotation and thoroughly enjoyed it,” he recalls. “I was fascinated with the anatomy and diseases of the eye.”



Johnson completed his residency in the department of ophthalmology at the University of Colorado Health Science Center. He spent a year in Denver after his residency, before moving to San Francisco where he first became interested in ophthalmic plastic and reconstructive surgery. Studying pathology at the time, Johnson had an opportunity to assist an oculoplastic surgeon one day a week. "I became very interested and realized I wanted the patient interaction that surgery allows."

Today, Johnson's practice is largely about patient interaction. On a typical day he sees as many as 50 patients, ranging in age from two-years-old to more than 90-years-old. Their conditions include orbital tumors, tear duct problems, droopy eyelids, eyelid trauma and skin cancers around the eye. Often he treats multiple fractures of the bones behind and underneath the eyes, injuries that can occur from car accidents, punches in the eye, or sports injuries.

For his younger patients, the exam process takes an entirely different approach. "I take off my white doctor's jacket, play with the children and bring out the stickers." The father of a two-year-old daughter, Johnson understands that his pediatric patients need, first and foremost, to feel comfortable.

In addition to the satisfaction he feels working directly with patients, Johnson finds it very rewarding to work with ophthalmology residents. "I work with them from the first year of their training, when everything is new to them, to the time that they graduate three years later," he says. "It is extremely rewarding to see their achievements and growth during the time they train at Bascom Palmer."

Among the complicated surgeries Johnson performs is *optic nerve sheath fenestration*, a procedure to relieve built-up pressure around the optic nerve that can lead to permanent vision loss and blindness. During this highly technical surgery, one of the muscles controlling movement of the eye is disconnected, allowing the surgeon to rotate the eye and gain access to the optic nerve. Next, an incision is made in the protective covering of the optic nerve, which connects the eye to the brain. A window is then cut into the optic nerve sheath, allowing the excess fluid to escape. The results are immediate, often restoring most of the vision that was lost, and halting further vision loss.

Currently, Johnson is studying *biofilms*, colonies of bacteria that can coat implants and synthetic tear drainage tubes, and lead to chronic infections that do not resolve with conventional antibiotic therapy. Additionally, he is looking at different materials that will lead to the best post-operative results in the treatment of orbital fractures.

Outside the institute, Johnson is an adventurer, listing mountain climbing and ice climbing among his favorite hobbies. Annually, he travels with friends to Ouray, Colorado, spending one week sinking crampons and ice tools into vertical pillars of ice. Twice he has summited Mount Ranier, and once he attempted University Peak in Alaska, before being forced to turn back because the avalanche risk was too high.

An avid reader, Johnson strives to read one book each month, naming *Shadow of the Wind* among his current favorite titles. Additionally, he enjoys the opera, which like his work, is a precise and artful performance.

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