

Dr. Alice R. McPherson, MD

Table of Contents

Harvard In Memoriam: [In Memoriam: Alice McPherson, MD](#)

- Website link: <https://eye.hms.harvard.edu/news/memorial-alice-mcpherson-md>

Retina Research Foundation: [Remembering Our Founder and President](#)

- Website link: <https://retinaresearchfnd.org/about-rrf/remembering-our-founder-and-president/>

McPherson Eye Research Institute Obituary: [About Alice R. McPherson, MD](#)

- Website link: <https://vision.wisc.edu/about-alice-r-mcpherson-md/>

American Academy of Ophthalmology Obituary: [Alice R. Pherson, MD](#)

- Website link: <https://www.aao.org/membership/member-obituaries-detail/alice-r-mcpherson-md>

American Society of Retina Specialists History of Retina Tribute: [Dr. Alice McPherson Tribute](#)

- Website link: <https://retinahistory.asrs.org/retina-pioneers/alice-r-mcpherson-md>

Pan-American Association of Ophthalmology Obituary: [PAAO Obituary Dr. Alice Pherson](#)

- Website link: <https://paaao.org/obit-dr-alice-r-mcpherson/>

UW-Madison Distinguished Alumni Award: [Alice R. McPherson, MD](#)

- Website link: <https://uwalumni.com/news/alice-mcpherson/>

The Lancet obituary article: [The Lancet obituary: Dr. Alice McPherson](#)

- Website link: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(23\)01679-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(23)01679-3/fulltext)

Dr. Alice Ruth McPherson was a trailblazer. Born and raised in Canada, she completed her undergraduate and medical degrees here at UW-Madison, as well as a residency in ophthalmology at the University Hospital. In 1957, she received a fellowship with the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary, and became the first female vitreoretinal fellow of Dr. Charles Schepens, considered to be “the father of modern retinal surgery,” who became her friend and mentor. Moving to Texas soon afterwards, Dr. McPherson became the first full-time female retina specialist in the world. Her practice flourished thanks to her incredible commitment to her patients, her remarkable insight and instincts, and her determination to embrace new methods and advance the field of retina. She pioneered the application of many retinal treatments, including scleral buckling and cryotherapy, and won numerous awards for her work, notably becoming the first woman to receive the Gonin Medal. This PDF offers some of the many documents written about Dr. McPherson's life & work.

Dr. McPherson was devoted to the advancement of knowledge and research in the field. In 1969, she founded the Retina Research Foundation (RRF) in Houston, Texas, with donor gifts. Through her philanthropy and support from a network of donors, the RRF supports numerous funding programs and awards for research on a variety of retinal diseases. In 2012, UW-Madison's Eye Research Institute was renamed the McPherson Eye Research Institute (MERI) to recognize her immense contributions. Dr. McPherson was modest, hard-working, and social; her efforts brought together the most important figures in the field of retina. Her legacy is carried on both by the institutions she created and the countless patient whose lives were changed by her exceptional skill and care.

In Memoriam: Alice McPherson, MD

Wed, 02/01/2023



It is with heavy hearts that we announce that alumna Alice McPherson, MD, passed away peacefully at the age of 97 on January 16, 2023. A Professor of Ophthalmology at Baylor College of Medicine, Dr. McPherson was the first full-time woman vitreoretinal surgeon in the world and a towering figure in the field of retina.

Dr. McPherson achieved a remarkable career, although she was incredibly humble about her many accomplishments. She will be remembered as an extraordinary physician, teacher, scholar, leader, and philanthropist.

Retina Pioneer and Trailblazer for Women

Dr. McPherson played an instrumental role in not only advancing the field of retina, but also serving as an advocate and inspiration for women in ophthalmology. Born in Canada, she earned her medical degree and completed her ophthalmology residency at the University of Wisconsin. She then became the first woman to complete a retina fellowship and did so under the mentorship of Charles L. Schepens, MD— the “Father of Modern Retinal

Surgery”—at Mass Eye and Ear. Upon completing her fellowship in 1959, Dr. McPherson founded the first retina service in Texas at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston and became the first full-time female retina specialist in the world.

Dr. McPherson made innumerable contributions to the study and treatment of retinal disease, particularly retinal detachment. She pioneered several procedures that are now accepted as standard treatment for retinal disease, including scleral buckling procedures, cryotherapy, xenon arc, and laser photocoagulation; and she was a thought leader in the treatment of diabetic retinopathy and retinopathy of prematurity.

World Authority in Retina

As a testament to Dr. McPherson’s excellence in patient care and research, she was honored with many awards. In the 1960s, she was the first American woman to be accepted into the European Club Jules Gonin, and in 2014, she reached another pinnacle in her career when she became the first woman to receive the Jules Gonin Medal—one of the most prestigious medals in ophthalmology. In 2018, she received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Houston Ophthalmology Society, and in 2019, she received the inaugural Retina Hall of Fame Award for her extraordinary contributions to the retina field.

Dr. McPherson applied her knowledge and leadership acumen to many professional organizations, including as the first female president of the Retina Society, the first female chair of the Pan-American Association of Ophthalmology Foundation, and the second Vice President of the American Academy of Ophthalmology.

Visionary Leader and Philanthropist

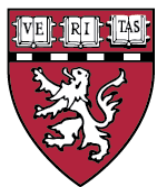


Dr. McPherson was an outstanding leader and generous philanthropist. She founded several institutions that have helped advance retina research, including the Retina Research Foundation, the McPherson Eye Research Institute, and the Schepens International Society.

Under her leadership, the Retina Research Foundation awarded over \$40 million to retina research, established Research Chairs and Professorships, sponsored international fellowships and travel grants, and made it possible for junior scientists to advance their careers. The Foundation has also established several major ophthalmology awards, including the Charles L. Schepens MD/American Academy of Ophthalmology Award, the Award of Merit Lecture (presented by the Retina Society), the Mills and Margaret Cox Award of the Macula Society, the Paul Kayser International Award in Retina Research (presented by the International Society for Eye Research), the Gonin Lecture (presented by Club Jules Gonin), the Gonin Medalist (presented by the International Council of Ophthalmology at the World Ophthalmology Congress), and the Gertrude D. Pyron Award (presented by the American Society of Retina Specialists).

Dr. McPherson firmly believed in the power of education, innovation, and giving back. It was these qualities in her own mentor, Dr. Schepens, that were instrumental in shaping her career. More than a mentor, Dr. Schepens was her trusted colleague and dear friend for more than five decades, and as the first woman retina fellow, she was forever grateful for his willingness to teach her. In 2012, to honor his incredible life and legacy, Dr. McPherson generously funded the Charles L. Schepens Chair at Harvard Medical School, which is currently held by Dr. Patricia D'Amore.

Like her mentor, Dr. McPherson has established an enduring legacy that will be a driving force for progress in the field of retina for years to come. She will live on in the hearts and minds of all whom she touched.



HARVARD
MEDICAL SCHOOL

DEPARTMENT OF
Ophthalmology

AFFILIATES: [Massachusetts Eye and Ear](#) | [Schepens Eye Research Institute of Mass. Eye and Ear](#) | [Massachusetts General Hospital](#) | [Boston Children's Hospital](#) | [Beetham Eye Institute at Joslin Diabetes Center](#) | [Brigham and Women's Hospital](#) | [Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center](#) | [Cambridge Health](#)

[Alliance](#) | [VA Boston Healthcare System](#) | [VA Maine Healthcare System](#)

PARTNERS: [L V Prasad Eye Institute \(India\)](#) | [Shanghai Eye and ENT
Hospital, Fudan University \(China\)](#)

[location_on](#)

[Contact the Harvard Ophthalmology Communications Office](#)

[Admin login](#)

Copyright © 2025 The President and Fellows of Harvard College
[Accessibility](#)[Digital Accessibility](#)[Report Copyright Infringement](#)[Info Practices](#)

Remembering Our Founder and President

 retinaresearchfnd.org/about-rrf/remembering-our-founder-and-president

ALICE RUTH MCPHERSON, MD



Dr. Alice Ruth McPherson, 2022

Her focus in retina was motivated by low cure rates of retinal detachment in the early 1950s. In 1959, she completed a fellowship in retinal diseases and retinal surgery at the Massachusetts Ear and Eye Infirmary at Harvard University Medical School under the supervision of Charles L. Schepens, MD, considered to be the father of modern retinal surgery. She was one of the first fellows of Dr. Schepens and the first-ever female vitreoretinal fellow. Her admiration for Dr. Schepens, who became a mentor and a friend, informed many of her professional and philanthropic actions throughout the remainder of her life.

In 1958, Dr. McPherson married Anthony “Tony” Mierzwa and, when her training with Dr. Schepens ended, they made the decision to move to Houston, Texas. Dr. McPherson said, “The three best decisions I ever made were ophthalmology, Tony and Texas.”

Dr. McPherson’s retina expertise led her to become one of the world’s leading vitreoretinal specialists and retinal surgeons. Her scientific contributions included ground-breaking procedures. She vigorously advocated for the use of numerous retinal surgical procedures from their earliest implementation, including scleral buckling procedures, cryotherapy, xenon arc, laser photocoagulation, and vitrectomy, now accepted as basic elements of retinal disease treatment. Dr. McPherson pioneered the treatment of retinopathy of prematurity, and she was an early proponent of photocoagulation in the treatment of diabetic retinopathy. This was a highly debated approach, later proven correct by the large, randomized prospective National Eye Institute Diabetic Retinopathy Study. She trained over 100 vitreoretinal fellows, and her retina practice spanned more than 70 years, during which time she always did the best she could for her patients. Dr. Alice McPherson was devoted to her patients, and they to her.

With the establishment of her private practice and her professorship appointment at the Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, Dr. McPherson founded the first retina service in Texas and, more broadly, in the south. Simultaneously, she became the first full-time female retina specialist in the United States and the world. She remained committed to Baylor College of Medicine to the end of her life, and she ensured continuous funding of vision scientists affiliated with the College’s Cullen Eye Institute for many decades.

Dr. McPherson was a founding charter member and later the first female president of the Retina Society, the founding president of the University of Wisconsin Ophthalmology Alumni Association, and the first female chair of the Pan-American Association of Ophthalmology Foundation. Dr. McPherson was the first American woman to be accepted into the prestigious European Club Jules Gonin, and she made ophthalmic history as the first woman selected to receive the Jules Gonin Medal, the highest achievement in ophthalmology. Most recently, Dr. McPherson was the inaugural recipient of the Retina Hall of Fame Award, bestowed in recognition of her inventive contributions in the retina field and her dedication to retina research. Never giving much thought to being the first in so many aspects of her life, Dr. McPherson was always self-effacing. She said, “It’s all about working together, sharing ideas, educating and inspiring others—men and women alike—to join our mission to save and prolong eyesight.”

In 1969, Dr. McPherson founded the Retina Research Foundation (RRF) in Houston, Texas, dedicated to the eradication of retinal disease by funding basic retinal research.

She reflected, “As I gained experience in academic ophthalmology and clinical research, I became increasingly convinced that the most important contribution I could make would be to establish an organization that could help develop and sustain innovative retinal research. RRF moved from a dream, to a concept, to a reality.” This endeavor gave her much satisfaction, and under her leadership as President and Scientific Adviser, RRF funded well over 1,000 basic research grants and helped to launch the careers of many major vision researchers in the United States and abroad. RRF established major awards in collaboration with the leading ophthalmologic societies, chairs and professorships at universities and research institutions, travel grants for young scientists, and international fellowships of advanced subspecialty training. From its founding, the Foundation has awarded over \$40 million to retina research.

Dr. McPherson’s vision and support were essential to the formation of the University of Wisconsin Eye Research Institute, renamed the McPherson Eye Research Institute in her honor in 2012. Always keenly interested in the scientific pursuits of the Institute, which leads collaborative efforts amongst researchers in vision-related fields across the Madison campus, Dr. McPherson remained actively engaged with its leadership and scientists. She highly valued her relationships with the Institute’s successive Emmett A. Humble Distinguished Directors, Dr. Daniel M. Albert and since 2012, Dr. David M. Gamm.

It was Dr. McPherson’s unique combination, an elegant, caring, and brilliant woman of many firsts and great accomplishments, that made her a legend, a visionary whose imprint will be remembered through the advancements achieved in retina research, in the education and encouragement of her ophthalmology colleagues, and in the compassionate care of the many, many patients to which she dedicated her life. Ever humble, Dr. McPherson desired no recognition of her passing, however, her life-long actions ensure that her commitment to retina research will continue through the organizations she championed.

University of Wisconsin–Madison



McPherson Eye Research Institute

Working Together to Understand, Protect and Restore Vision

About Alice R. McPherson, MD



Dr. Alice McPherson passed away in Houston, TX, on January 16, 2023. Below, we are proud to review some of her many accomplishments in a life of service and dedication to fighting and curing blinding diseases.

Dr. Alice McPherson was an accomplished physician, teacher, scholar, leader, and pioneer dedicated to the study and treatment of retinal diseases. As a founder of two leading research institutions – the [Retina Research Foundation \(RRF\)](#) in Houston, Texas, and the McPherson Eye Research Institute at UW-Madison – she had an enormous influence on vision research worldwide. In 2014, Dr. McPherson received the [Gonin Medal](#), the oldest and most prestigious medal in ophthalmology, awarded by the University of Lausanne and the Societe Suisse d’Ophtalmologie. Honorees are chosen by the Board of the International Council of Ophthalmology.

Dr. McPherson received her baccalaureate and medical degrees and took her ophthalmology residency at the University of Wisconsin. She completed a retina fellowship with Dr. Charles Schepens at the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary. A professor of ophthalmology at [Baylor College of Medicine](#) for many years, Dr. McPherson specialized in macular degeneration and vitreoretinal diseases and surgery. She was also a Fellow of both the American College of Surgeons and the International College of Surgeons.

Her scientific contributions to ophthalmology began with pioneering scleral buckling procedures, cryotherapy and xenon arc and laser photocoagulation in the treatment of retinal diseases. She was an early and vigorous advocate of photocoagulation in the treatment of diabetic retinopathy. This was initially a controversial position, later proven correct by the large, randomized prospective National Eye Institute Diabetic Retinopathy Study.

In 1969, Dr. McPherson founded the [Retina Research Foundation \(RRF\)](#), one of the nation's leading eye research organizations, dedicated to promoting understanding, prevention and treatment of retinal diseases. To accomplish this, in 1973 the RRF started to fund pilot research studies and in 1976 began collaborating with outstanding organizations to support a variety of programs in retina research around the world. The RRF supports important ongoing studies; has established research chairs and professorships at leading universities and institutions; sponsors international fellowships that provide advanced sub-specialty training to young clinician-scientists; and has developed career advancement awards for young scientists.

Dr. McPherson's extraordinary dedication and leadership benefited many institutions and professional organizations. She received distinguished honors from numerous universities and medical scientific organizations, including the University of Wisconsin, Harvard Medical School, the American Academy of Ophthalmology, the Pan American Association of Ophthalmology, and the European Society of Ophthalmology. She served

as President of the Retina Society, the Pan American Association of Ophthalmology, and as Founding President of the [University of Wisconsin Ophthalmology Alumni Association](#). In 2015, she received the Distinguished Alumni Award from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Contact Us

McPherson Eye Research Institute
9431 Wisconsin Institutes for
Medical Research (WIMR)
1111 Highland Avenue
Madison, WI 53705
Map
Email: info@vision.wisc.edu
Phone: 608-265-4023

Website feedback, questions or accessibility issues: chaim@wisc.edu | Learn more about [accessibility at UW–Madison](#).

This site was built using the [UW Theme](#) | [Privacy Notice](#) | © 2025 Board of Regents of the [University of Wisconsin System](#).

American Academy of Ophthalmology

Membership / Member Obituaries / Alice R. McPherson, M.D.

Alice R. Pherson, MD

Alice R. McPherson, MD, pioneer in vitreoretinal surgery, died at 96

Dr. Alice McPherson, the first full-time female vitreoretinal specialist in the world and founder of the Retina Research Foundation, died on January 16, 2023, at the age of 96. Dr. McPherson attended medical school at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and completed her retina fellowship at the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary in Boston. A practitioner in Houston, she also taught at Baylor College of Medicine, where she founded their retina service. Dr. McPherson dedicated her career to promoting the understanding, prevention, and treatment of retinal diseases. She was president of the Retina Research Foundation, the Pan-American Association of Ophthalmology, and the Retina Society, and she established the McPherson Eye Research Institute at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Dr. McPherson served as trustee of the Schepens International Society, and in the 1960s she became the first female American member of the European Jules Gonin Club, which awarded her the Jules Gonin Medal in 2014. She was the inaugural recipient of the Retina Hall of Fame Lifetime Achievement Award in 2019. "Dr. McPherson contributed greatly to the advance of ophthalmology and care of patients with retinal disease throughout the world," said Bradley R. Straatsma, MD, JD, professor and chairman emeritus of the ophthalmology department at UCLA School of Medicine. "It is not easy to describe her extraordinary life, both personally and professionally. She was an amazing, trailblazing woman," said Timothy Stout, MD, PhD, MBA, colleague and director of the Cullen Eye Institute at Baylor College of Medicine, and Academy Secretary for Lifelong Learning and Assessment. "Truly a full life well lived."

From the American Society of Retina Specialists

History of Retina Retina Pioneer

**Alice R. McPherson, MD
1926-2023**

Tribute

Contributed by Judy E. Kim, MD, FARVO, FASRS, Past ASRS President



Dr. Alice McPherson in discussion with a patient prior to an argon laser procedure in 1977

Alice McPherson was a pioneer of landmark treatments for retinal diseases, including scleral buckling, cryotherapy and xenon arc, and laser photocoagulation. While initially controversial, her early advocacy for photocoagulation for treating diabetic retinopathy was later supported by the National Eye Institute Diabetic Retinopathy Study.

She married Tony Mierzwa after her retina fellowship; she moved to Texas to accept a position at Baylor College of Medicine. There, she established the retina service and had a long career as a professor of ophthalmology, launched a fellowship program, and taught over 100 residents and fellows.

Despite a large and busy retina practice, she was generous with her time, knowledge, and skill.

Dr. McPherson trained under the legendary Charles Schepens, MD—known as the father of modern retinal surgery—and credited him for giving her an unprecedented career opportunity that led to her becoming the world's first woman full-time retina specialist in 1960.

“Dr. Schepens accepted me into his retina surgery program at a time when no other women had been offered this type of fellowship training,” Dr. McPherson recalled. “He gave me his full support and allowed me to learn from his expertise. Without his training, I would have spent the rest of my life doing refractions. But instead, I have been fortunate enough to have had an extensive vitreoretinal surgery practice and to have founded the successful Retina Research Foundation.” In 1984, nearly a quarter-century after she began her retina practice, Dr. McPherson and her mentee, Judith Feigon, MD, became the first women members of what was then the Vitreous Society.



Dr. McPherson with Charles L. Schepens, MD

Alice McPherson was an avid philanthropist who founded not one, but two leading vision research organizations. She launched the Retina Research

Foundation (RRF), one of the nation's leading eye research support organizations, in Houston in 1969; and founded the McPherson Eye Research Institute at the University of Wisconsin (UW) in 2005. RRF has awarded over 1000 grants and \$38 million in research funding and educational opportunities to vision researchers.

The ASRS is grateful to Dr. McPherson and the Retina Research Foundation for funding the annual Gertrude D. Pyron Award. Alice McPherson also established several more awards and scholarships, none of which are named for her. While she received numerous awards and recognitions, Dr. McPherson cited the Gonin Medal—the oldest and most prestigious medal in ophthalmology, awarded every 4 years—and the inaugural Retina Hall of Fame Lifetime Achievement Award as highlights of her career; she valued and was humbled by her peers' recognition. Despite her larger-than-life status, she never forgot her roots; Alice McPherson's Gonin Medal is on display in the Mandelbaum and Albert Family Vision Gallery at the UW-Madison, her alma mater.

Dr. McPherson was devoted to advancing research because she saw the impact of devastating eye diseases in patients—and was inspired by her mentor, Dr. Schepens. “He strongly advocated that only from understanding the clinical and basic science research can the information and the tools necessary to improve patient care be obtained,” she said.

Dr. McPherson, thank you! Your legacy will live on.

Work History

1960-2022

- Professor of Ophthalmology, Baylor College of Medicine

Education & Training

Fellowship: Retina Service, Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary, with Charles Schepens, MD

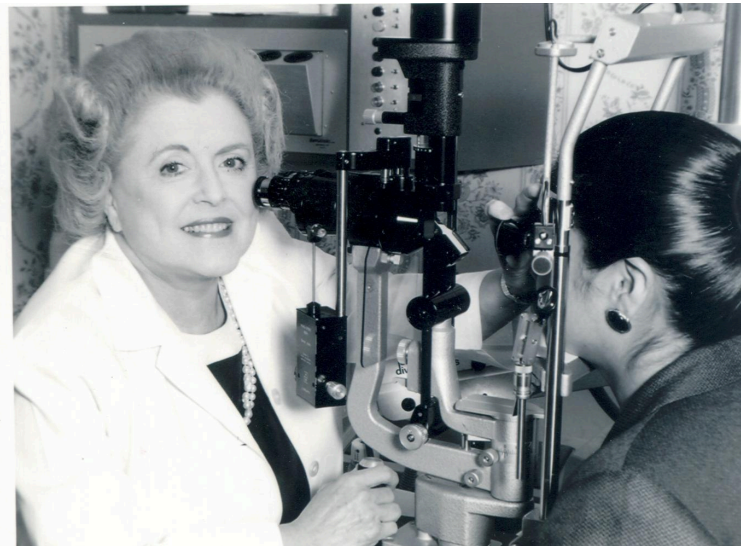
Residency: University of Wisconsin-Madison

Medical School: University of Wisconsin-Madison

Undergraduate: University of Wisconsin-Madison

Reflections

Robert Josephberg, MD



Dr. Alice McPherson doing a patient exam in 1989

My mentor was a fantastic human being. I idolized Dr. McPherson; she treated me and those around her with respect and dignity. I had a wonderful time as her fellow in Houston for 2 years—one of the best times of my life! Our field of medicine has lost a wonderful, humble, and very generous human being.

Jerry Bovino, MD, FASRS

Alice McPherson was a role model for us all. She loved her patients, her colleagues, and her profession. Alice was generous with her time for teaching

and she was always willing to help young doctors. She succeeded in what was a man's world at the time—not because she was as good as the men, but because in most cases, she was better!

Joel Pearlman, MD, PhD, FASRS

Dr. McPherson paid it forward. During my time at Baylor, Dr. Michael DeBaakey may have been the head of cardiothoracic surgery, but Dr. McPherson was the real heart. Her devotion to research and patients-first ethic permeated medical teaching throughout the institution.

Additional Resources

History of Retina: [Retina Reflection from Dr. McPherson](#)

[Retina Times: To All the Amazing Women Retina Pioneers](#)

[Retina Times: ASRS Remembers Retina Legend Alice R. McPherson, MD \(1926-2023\)](#)

*Please note: Portions of this Tribute were originally published in *Retina Times*. See article links in the resources section above.

(Published March 2025)

Pan-American Association of Ophthalmology

Dr. Alice R. McPherson (1926-2023)

Jan 24, 2023

[Announcement, Obituaries](#)

It is with great sadness that we announce the passing of a Pan-American icon. On January 16, 2023, Dr. Alice R. McPherson passed away. Dr. McPherson was president of the Pan-American Association of Ophthalmology, 1995-1997, and Chair of the Pan-American Ophthalmological Foundation, 1997-2000. She was a pioneer, a humanitarian, an educator and a philanthropist, in ophthalmology, in her field of retina, and in the Pan-American. We will miss her.

[Click here](#) to view the memorial bulletin from her foundation, Retina Research Foundation.

Below are a few memories from some who knew her. If you would like to share a memory, please leave a comment at the bottom of this page.



Dr. Alice R. McPherson



The Pan-American Presidents at the McPherson Dinner , Las Vegas 2017

Front row, seated (left to right): Dr. Bronwyn Bateman, Dr. McPherson, Dr. Liana Ventura

Back row, standing (left to right): Dr. Rubens Belfort Jr., Dr. Richard L. Abbott, Dr.

Francisco Contreras, Dr. Enrique S. Malbran, Dr. Miguel N. Burnier, Mr. Nelson Marques,

Dr. William De La Peña, Dr. Bradley R. Straatsma, Dr. Eduardo Alfonso

In Memory of Dr. McPherson

As President of the Pan-American Association of Ophthalmology, it is with deep, deep sadness that I would like to announce that Dr. Alice R. McPherson peacefully passed away on Monday evening, January 16, 2023, after an extended period of hospice care.

Although her passing has been expected, we truly will miss her leadership and the vibrant spirit with which she indomitably lived her 97 years.

We find comfort in knowing that during these last few months, she was able to be at home, alert, content and happy, with the opportunity to see those she held so dear.

Dr. McPherson was the first woman elected as president of the PAAO from 1995 to 1997. She has always exercised her leadership with extreme dedication and focus, but always with education and tenderness. She exercised the so called soft power with mastery.

I wouldn't be president of PAAO if I weren't a beneficiary (even if indirectly) of the Gillingham Pan-American Fellowship, one of the many ways to encourage education and research fostered by Dr. McPherson.

She will be missed.

Dr. McPherson strongly indicated she didn't want any public service and the Retina Research Foundation intends to honor her request. In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to the Pan-American Ophthalmological Foundation (<https://paao.org/paof/donate>) or to the Retina Research Foundation (<https://retinaresearchfnd.org/giving>).

Paulo E.C. Dantas MD PhD (Brazil), PAAO President 2022-2025

Dr. McPherson influenced the lives and careers of so many throughout the years with her many Pan-American Scholarship programs:

- North American Course membership program (1990-1995)
- Gillingham Pan-American Fellowship (1993-present)
- Paul Kayser International Scholar Program (1995-2012)
- Tyson ARVO Travel Awards (2003-2010)
- Paul Kayser / RRF Global Award (2012-present)



McPherson/RRF Scholarship recipients, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil 2013

Left to right: Dr. Maria Alejandra Henriquez (Peru), unknown, Dr. Arturo Ramirez Miranda (Mexico), Dr. Enrique Graue Hernandez (Mexico), Dr. McPherson (center with roses), unknown, Dr. Martin Serrano (Venezuela), Dr. Maria Cristina Nishiwaki Dantas (Brasil), Dr. R.V. Paul Chan (USA), unknown

UW-Madison Distinguished Alumni Award

Alice McPherson '48, MD'51

Alice McPherson '48, MD'51, a professor of ophthalmology at Baylor College of Medicine, has promoted new therapies for the treatment of eye disease.

Niki Denison

August 27, 2015

[Distinguished Alumni Award >](#)

[Share This Story](#)

Alice McPherson '48, MD'51 is one of the foremost vitreoretinal specialists in the world and studied under Dr. Charles Schepens, one of the founders of modern retinal surgery.

In 1960, McPherson moved to Houston to begin practice as the world's first full-time woman vitreoretinal specialist, and established herself as one of the pioneers in the field. In 1960, she also founded the retina service at Baylor College of Medicine in conjunction with a private practice in retina. She promoted several procedures that are now accepted as basic elements in retinal-detachment surgery and the treatment of diabetic retinopathy.

In 1969, she founded the Retina Research Foundation (RRF) in Houston, Texas, dedicated solely to the eradication of retinal disease. Under her leadership as president and scientific adviser, the RRF has funded more than 1,000 grants and helped to launch the careers of many major vision researchers in the United States and abroad. The RRF

has also established chairs and professorships at universities and research institutions, and it has provided advanced subspecialty programs to young scientists who then return to their native countries.

In 2002, her vision, inspiration, and support were critical in the establishment of the [McPherson Eye Research Institute](#) (MERI) at UW-Madison. She serves on its advisory board and has seen MERI gain international prominence as a center of excellence for vision research.

McPherson's many other contributions to the University of Wisconsin are impressive. She served for 12 years on the UW Foundation Board of Directors; she was the founding president of the UW Ophthalmology Alumni Association; and she has been responsible for establishing endowed chairs and lectureships at the university.

McPherson's numerous honors include receiving an honorary doctor of science degree from UW-Madison in 1997 and serving as commencement speaker in 1995. The [UW School of Medicine and Public Health](#) is divided into "houses" for study and social programs, and McPherson House is so named to recognize her contributions. A marble bust and portrait of Alice McPherson now grace the medical school.

The Lancet

Obituary: Volume 402, Issue 10402, P606, August 19, 2023

Alice Ruth McPherson

By Geoff Watts

Ophthalmologist specialising in retinal surgery who was the first woman to be a full-time vitreoretinal surgeon. She was born in Regina, SK, Canada, on June 30, 1926 and died in Houston TX, USA, on Jan 16, 2023 aged 96 years.

In 1967 a grateful patient handed ophthalmologist Alice McPherson a cheque for US\$50 000 and told her, “Do something good with this.” She did. McPherson, who was then dividing her time between private practice and an academic job at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, TX, USA, used it to seed a new body dedicated to basic research into retinal disease. In 1972 the organisation changed its name from the Southwest Eye Foundation to the Retinal Research Foundation (RRF). With McPherson as its President and Scientific Director it prospered; since its creation RRF has distributed \$40 million in grants, fellowships, and other support for retinal research. McPherson, who continued seeing patients into old age, described the Foundation as “my hobby and calling”.

As a young doctor, newly graduated from the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health in Madison, ophthalmology was not McPherson's first choice. In 1952, after a year-long internship in California's Santa Barbara Hospital, she moved to Chicago to take up an anaesthetic residency. It was during a second residency in Chicago that she opted for ophthalmology and then returned to the University of Wisconsin in 1953 to finish her training and begin work as an ophthalmologist. What drew her to the specialty remains a matter for speculation, but David Gamm, Professor of Ophthalmology at the University of Wisconsin, thinks it was because the discipline was still in its relative infancy. “She always gravitated towards things that were pioneering...towards things that were on the cutting edge”, he says.

The surgical treatment of retinal disorders in particular was still at an early stage of development, which is why 1957 found McPherson moving to Boston, MA, to join the Retina Service of the Massachusetts Eye and Ear infirmary and a fellowship with the leading retinal surgeon Charles Schepens. He became McPherson's mentor and friend.

McPherson's next move was to Texas where she first joined an existing practice and then, in 1960, set up her own. At that time, the southern states of the US had little to offer in the way of retinal surgery. McPherson was the first woman to become a full-time retinal surgeon—one of many such firsts in her life. She also joined Baylor College of Medicine as a part-time academic, where in 1998 McPherson was appointed Professor of Ophthalmology.

Her arrival at Baylor came at a time when ophthalmologists had devised a number of new procedures for retinal work: techniques which McPherson seized on with enthusiasm. These included scleral buckling procedures, cryotherapy, xenon arc and laser photocoagulation, and vitrectomy. McPherson's large patient base allowed her and her colleagues to rapidly gain experience of using and so refining these procedures. “She would make sure she got properly trained [in the technique]...She would get all her ducks in a row, and then go do it,” Gamm recalls. “She wasn’t afraid to do things for the first time.” Arthur Willis is Emeritus Professor of Ophthalmology at the Methodist Hospital in Houston, TX, USA, and current President of RRF. “Alice was also one of the pioneers of treating retinal detachments with scleral buckles without draining the subretinal fluid”, he says. “This reduced the complication rate and the likelihood of infection. And in the early 1980s she was the first person to operate on a baby with retinopathy of prematurity...She had innate skills. She had great hands and could adopt new things so quickly.”

“Alice just wouldn’t waste a second”, says Willis. “She was busy doing something every minute of every day. And if she did find some spare time she would come up with new ideas.” In 2012, impressed by McPherson's career and mindful of her continuing affection for her alma mater, the University of Wisconsin renamed its ophthalmic division the McPherson Eye Research Institute. Gamm now leads the institute as its Director.

“Alice was kind”, he says. “She had infinite energy and she loved what she did.” In her later years, he adds, when her reputation was established, “she had a magnetic personality...but she downplayed everything she did”. McPherson was predeceased by her husband Anthony Mierzwa.



Copyright © 2023 UW Health

