

Building a practice and a relationship

by Ellen Stodola EyeWorld Senior Staff Writer



Drs. Jerry and Carol Shields attend a family wedding.

Jerry and Carol Shields have built their relationship and an ocular oncology practice over the years

For Jerry Shields, MD, and Carol Shields, MD, ophthalmology runs close to home. The couple met years ago at Wills Eye Hospital when Dr. Carol Shields was a resident. They went on to get married and build an ocular oncology practice together. They shared their story with *EyeWorld*, detailing their personal and working relationships and the process of creating a successful ocular oncology practice, as well as building up the subspecialty itself.

Two paths to ocular oncology

For Dr. Carol Shields, the path to ocular oncology was not always clear, and she ended up choosing ophthalmology in a choice between that and dermatology.

For her undergraduate education, Dr. Carol Shields attended the University of Notre Dame, where she played varsity basketball. She learned how to balance her life

while going to class and playing basketball. "Even though you think you have no time to do other things, you can always carve out time," she said.

After attending medical school at the University of Pittsburgh, Dr. Carol Shields decided to pursue ophthalmology. "I love the precision of ophthalmology," she said. She also likes the art involved, particularly in ophthalmic drawings.

"In our field, I was thinking of doing general ophthalmology but migrated over to ocular oncology partly because of Jerry's influence," she said. "I thought it was a nice, wide open subspecialty where there was a lot of room for improvement."

Although ocular oncologists see patients with very serious problems, Dr. Carol Shields trusted that she would be able to master the subspecialty. "I learn things every day from both my juniors and my seniors," she said. "I think all of us who want to master our subspecialty have to be open to being a lifelong student."

Dr. Jerry Shields also had an unlikely path to ocular oncology. He was the youngest of eight children, with none of his other brothers and sisters attending college. He had the opportunity to attend Murray State

before moving on to the University of Michigan for medical school.

At first, he thought he might like to pursue psychiatry. Then, he was drafted and went to Vietnam with the Marine Corps for almost a year, and from there, he traveled to Europe with the U.S. Navy. It was working in the bunkers in Vietnam that ultimately drove him to pursue ophthalmology.

"After I got back from Europe, I heard Wills Eye had good training," Dr. Jerry Shields said. He applied and did his residency there. He then took a fellowship in ophthalmic pathology in Washington, D.C., traveled to Brazil for a few months of mission work, and ultimately ended up back at Wills on the retina service. "It gradually became apparent that I would continue in the field of ocular oncology," he said. "After 10 years, along came Carol and we fell in love and got married."

"When I came to Wills, I was focused on learning everything I could about ophthalmology," Dr. Carol Shields said. She had initially planned to head back to Pittsburgh, where the rest of her family was, to practice ophthalmology, but ended up staying in Philadelphia.

Beginnings as a couple

Dr. Carol Shields' brother, Patrick Lally, MD, had preceded her at Wills Eye by 4 years. As a first-year resident, she didn't know anyone at Wills Eye or in the whole city of Philadelphia.

"One of the senior residents asked if I wanted to play tennis because I had a strong interest in sports and had played college basketball," she said.

She played doubles with Dr. Jerry Shields, who she said was a very good tennis player. They made a good team, and he soon asked her on a date to see a Philadelphia 76ers basketball game.

"Things just happened," Dr. Carol Shields said. "It was the right time in his life to settle down and I was just 'rolling with the punches.'"

Dr. Jerry Shields was working at Wills Eye developing a service just for patients with eye tumors, which was something that no one else was doing at the time.

"Carol fell into place and before we knew it, we were getting married," he said. "She initially was going to go back to Pittsburgh with her brother, but then we fell in love and decided to get married."

After Dr. Carol Shields finished her residency, she went to England for 4 months when their newborn was only 5 months old, Dr. Jerry Shields said. She did eye plastic and orbital tumor training in England, then did an eye pathology fellowship at Wills Eye, and finally one with Dr. Jerry Shields on the oncology service.

"From there we started seeing more and more patients, and it became busier and busier," he said. "Before long we had a successful practice with referrals coming in from the U.S. and around the world."

Their unique practice

The practice gradually developed, Dr. Jerry Shields said. "Initially, we just saw patients who had a tumor in the eye like a melanoma, and that was the main malignant tumor we treated." They would get referrals from general ophthalmologists, identify the tumors, and pass the patient back to that doctor to treat.

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Drs. Jerry and Carol Shields with their seven children during the Melanoma Research Foundation Gala in 2015.



Dr. Carol Shields introduces her husband as recipient of the Laureate Award at the 2014 American Academy of Ophthalmology annual meeting. Source (all): Carol Shields, MD

But gradually, doctors started asking for their tumor patients to be treated at Wills Eye. Even more referrals came in as the Shields were lecturing more.

“The field was in its infancy when we first started in it together,” Dr. Carol Shields said. There were only a few people around the world interested in ocular oncology, and these were cases that doctors usually wanted to get in and out as fast as possible because they can take a lot of time. “We focused just on treating these cases,” she said.

More and more, expertise in therapies caused the patients to

want to stay with them and get treatment on the oncology service, she said.

Their clinic also had many new technologies. “When ultrasound first came out, we were one of the first to get it because it was so important for tumors in the eye,” Dr. Carol Shields said. Fluorescein, OCT, and OCT-A were also important in their clinic.

Before long, the Shields started training other fellows to start their own ocular oncology centers either back in their country or in the U.S.

One portion of ocular oncology that’s made giant steps, Dr. Carol

Shields said, is the management of retinoblastoma. In the last 10 years, there have been new methods of chemotherapy and injecting it directly into the eye, she said. “We’re all learning from each other in the U.S. and around the world.” Retinoblastoma is the perfect example of listening and learning and moving forward together, she said.

“The newest focus is to try to nail melanoma, and everyone needs to work together on this,” Dr. Carol Shields said.

Recently, Wills Eye started the Ocular Oncology Reading Center

of America (OORCA), a resource for others to send in cases that they may have questions about for review. “If someone in another country has a case, they can upload information to this website and we will read it out for them,” Dr. Carol Shields said. It’s HIPAA protected and a nice way to help patients who can’t make a long trip to Philadelphia, she said.

In addition to seeing many patients and taking referrals, they have been instrumental in training residents and fellows in ocular oncology since they first began practicing. There have been more than 100 international residents and fellows since the late 1970s who have gone on to practice ocular oncology in their own countries. Additionally, Dr. Jerry Shields estimated that there are around a dozen practicing full time in the U.S. “We’ve contributed to the development of oncology and have spread our tentacles all around the world and have a big following where all of us get together once or twice a year to discuss our cases from different parts of the world,” he said.

Balancing work and home life

The Shields stay busy, working 5 days a week. They start by driving to work around 5:00 a.m., and each day brings a different variety of surgeries, research, or other work. On Mondays—the “new patient day”—they could see up to 50 new patients, Dr. Carol Shields said.

The Shields are very family oriented and like to spend time on their farm. They have seven children, who are grown now, with several pursuing careers in medicine.

Working and having a family was challenging at times, Dr. Carol Shields said, because they had to decide when to and when not to attend meetings. “Of all the things that I’ve done in my life and career, the thing that makes me the proudest are my children,” she said. “That’s the legacy that carries on.”

Dr. Jerry Shields agreed that having a family and raising children was a challenge while also having an academic career. “We accepted the challenge and did our best to work our way through everything.” He added that working with his wife has given him many opportunities and said that he probably would have dropped out of the practice years ago without her. **EW**