

# Recognized as a World Renowned Expert in Treating Eye Cancer in Children

## Timothy G. Murray, M.D., F.A.C.S.

“I wish I knew the words to convey our respect and gratitude for Dr. Murray’s skill and experience,” says Charlotte Howett, hours before boarding a plane bound for New Zealand.



The 28-year-old-mother and her husband are returning home with their two daughters, having accomplished what they set out to do—save the eye of their youngest daughter, Claudia (seen pictured at left.) It was a mission that took almost three years to accomplish, a mission they are certain would not have been achieved without the extraordinary abilities of Timothy G. Murray, M.D., F.A.C.S.

Murray, professor of ophthalmology and director of the Ocular Oncology Service at Bascom Palmer Eye Institute, is an internationally renowned expert in the diagnosis and management of eye cancer. His patients travel from all regions of the United States and around the world. Many are quite young.

Eye cancer is extremely rare. Its most common form, retinoblastoma, accounts for about three percent of cancers in children under the age of 21. For children under the age of five, however, it is the number one cancer.

“Eye cancer in children is a rare disease, but it is a significant disease,” says Murray. “It tends to strike early.” Even so, with early diagnosis and proper treatment, the cure rate at Bascom Palmer is almost 100 percent. Death, while rare, is always associated with a late or missed diagnosis or an incorrect course of treatment. Murray says an early diagnosis is one that occurs within three months of birth. A late diagnosis is when the child is between three months and three years of age.

Though the disease is easy to misdiagnose or miss completely, he explains the primary symptom for the disease rather simply. Unlike the typical red reflection that should be clearly visible when a light is focused on a healthy child’s eye during examination, the eye of a child with retinoblastoma reflects white. That’s because the cancer itself is chalky white. Though there may be other reasons that a child’s retina gives off a white rather than red reflection, further diagnosis under anesthesia is absolutely essential to rule out retinoblastoma.

“Attention to detail is key,” says Murray. “In the past, the child’s survival was the priority, not saving the eye. Today however, with early detection and an appropriate course of treatment, we can preserve the child’s eye and the vision.”

Typically, the course of treatment for pediatric retinoblastoma involves a combination of laser surgery and chemotherapy. “We see more cases and do more surgeries at Bascom Palmer than anywhere else in the world,” Murray says. “Successful treatment requires very strongly focused experts. The disease needs to be treated perfectly at the first treatment or things will not go well overall.” That, he adds, “requires phenomenally integrated care like we have here at Bascom Palmer. It is extremely important to be treated at a top center.”

Not surprisingly, treatment can be challenging for young patients. Children with retinoblastoma are generally too young to understand the examination that may be uncomfortable and includes very bright lights. That’s where the family comes in. “You have to involve and educate the family members. The family support group must be intimately involved in the child’s care.”

Nancy Beausir, whose son, Jake, now six, has been under Murray’s care for most of his life, says the doctor’s compassionate care has been as important as his skill. “To hand over my child’s life to

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the doctor, knowing that Dr. Murray is not only the best in his field, but also that he cared so much for Jake, meant everything to us," she says.

Last November, Jake underwent his first examination without anesthesia, a major milestone for a child diagnosed with severe retinoblastoma in both eyes. Today, the young boy from St. Petersburg, Florida is playing coach pitch baseball and beginning to read. "When your child is diagnosed with cancer, you feel like you're rushing down a river out of control. I have never looked back on Jake's treatment nor questioned anything Dr. Murray has ever done. He's been as much our counselor as our doctor."

That care has not gone unnoticed by Jake, who for years now, had insisted on speaking with Dr. Murray

before each procedure. "I think because of Dr. Murray's calm manner, I've never seen Jake scared. Jake is very comfortable at Bascom Palmer," says his grateful mother.

While retinoblastoma can occur in either one or both eyes, Murray explains that in the youngest children it is often present in both eyes. If not treated early, it can spread, or metastasize, to other parts of the body.

Retinoblastoma is not a new disease. However, it is being diagnosed more and more frequently. Murray believes that improved diagnostics as well as the increased prevalence of cancer causes, like viruses and the environment, are largely behind the increase in new cases. Additionally, because more and more children are surviving the disease, inheritance factors are also behind the increase.

While Murray is largely focused on ocular oncology and intraocular tumors, he also specializes in the treatment of diabetic retinopathy, macular degeneration and other macular disease. Vitreoretinal disease and surgery account for half of his practice.

In the laboratory as well as his clinic, Murray studies combined modality focal therapies for ocular oncology as well as tumor response to periodic chemotherapy, external beam radiotherapy and hyperthermia.

His work has taken on even greater meaning since becoming a father just one year ago. "You appreciate how precious life is, and you work that much harder." His wife, Nicole Ciccirelli, coordinates his clinic and plays an important role in providing the compassionate care that has become the hallmark of Murray's practice.

Nancy Beausir says it was Ciccirelli who provided the first sense of calm, less than an hour after Jake was diagnosed by a retina specialist in St. Petersburg. "The doctor told us to go home, pack a suitcase, and head to Bascom Palmer as fast as we could," she recalls. "We were panicking. But then Nicole called and said, 'I just want you to know your son is going to be all right. He'll grow up and he'll go to college.' I'll always remember those comforting words."

Murray says that what he and his team have been able to accomplish for Jake, and other young patients like him, is tremendously gratifying. "You have this unique entrusted care where parents are putting their child's life in your hands, and you are able to return a healthy, well-sighted child to them. I can not imagine anything more rewarding."

"Statistically, 50 percent of parents with retinoblastoma will pass the disease on to their children," Murray says. Knowing that fact, and what gene actually causes the disease, gives doctors at Bascom Palmer an important edge in diagnosing and treating retinoblastoma.