

Doctor Integrates Mind, Body & in Ophthalmology

Lori Ventura, M.D. associate professor of clinical ophthalmology and comprehensive ophthalmologist, integrates the spiritual and psychosocial aspects of a patient's life with the physical causes of disease.

Born in Kenosha, Wisconsin, Ventura received both her undergraduate and medical degree from the University of Wisconsin Medical School at Madison. She completed an ophthalmology residency at the University of Texas Health Science Center in San Antonio. Following her fellowship training in corneal and external disease at Bascom Palmer, Ventura was in private practice in Miami for six years. In 1992, she was invited to join the faculty at Bascom Palmer as the Institute's first comprehensive ophthalmologist, a general ophthalmologist trained in all areas of eye care who evaluates and refers patients to the ophthalmic subspecialist who can best meet the patient's needs. Caring for large numbers of glaucoma patients in both settings led her to focus her clinical practice and scientific research on the early detection of glaucoma.

Ventura is a co-principal investigator with Vittorio Porciatti, Ph.D., research professor of ophthalmology at Bascom Palmer, on an NIH-funded project, "Reversible Dysfunction in Glaucoma." The project is aimed at earlier detection of glaucoma using pattern electroretinography (PERG). Ten years ago, Ventura met Porciatti, a visual neuroscientist with expertise in electrophysiology, while he was at the Italian Research Council in Pisa, Italy. "I was looking for a better way to measure whether complementary methods of treatment such as acupuncture and meditation, could actually improve function for my patients with glaucoma," she recalls. They developed a long distance relationship and in 2001, Porciatti moved to Miami and joined Bascom Palmer, enhancing their scientific collaboration.

Annually, about 75 medical students from the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine rotate under Ventura, who is the clerkship director for the fourth year elective in ophthalmology. Among her teaching goals is to encourage students to befriend the patient, and to understand their disease through an investigation of multiple facets of a person's life, what Ventura calls "real doctoring." It is a lesson she has carried internationally as well, through multiple lectures and seminars. Looking beyond traditional diagnosis to understand other influences in a patient's life is central to Ventura's practice. "Suffering through events in my own life allowed me to understand how emotional pain may affect the body," says Ventura.

Though she had thrived on a heavily surgical practice for 10 years, Ventura eventually made the decision to stop operating when she discovered she did not have the optimal depth perception to convert from standard cataract surgery to phacoemulsification (the small incision method of cataract extraction). The decision to stop operating, combined with the difficult end of her 11-year marriage, forced her to slow down, leading to what she describes as probably the most insightful experience of her life. "Forfeiting the surgical practice, I gave myself that extra time and energy to heal. Pain teaches empathy. Through my experiences, I began to see the pain in the eyes of my

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patients... the emotional distress that lay behind their physical ailments.”

One year after her divorce, Ventura lost her eldest brother to pancreatic cancer. Unwilling to succumb to grief, she began to explore the psycho-neuro-immunological linkages to cancer, becoming involved with doctors at the University of Miami Courtelis Center for Psychosocial Oncology. Ventura worked with terminal cancer patients on their journey of healing, a spiritual retreat to the Florida Keys. Together with prayer, Ventura helped these patients using meditation and visual imagery, techniques she learned in her teens.

“I learned that a person could be terminally ill, yet spiritually and emotionally healed with no fear of death,” she says. “My own walk through the dark helped me to understand more about my patients who face potential blindness.”

Ventura, who believes that the approach to medicine must combine both the scientific and the spiritual, says about three to five of every 25 patients she sees are dealing with highly stressful issues in their lives that have a direct health impact. In her practice, patients present with complaints ranging from blurred vision, eye pain, headaches, excessive blinking, or inflammation of the eye and she believes that stress may exacerbate existing conditions like dry eye, macular degeneration or glaucoma.

In one case, Ventura sensed something amiss when a 13-year-old patient came in for treatment of a stye on her eyelid. Proceeding with a careful and tender line of questioning, the actual problem became clear — the young girl had been abused by her stepfather. “She was too afraid to speak out. It was almost as if this minor infection was her body’s way of crying for help,” says Ventura, who believes we all have our own individual predisposition to illness which may be made manifest under conditions of chronic stress.

Balancing work and home life, Ventura has a 17-year-old daughter, Arianna. She writes poetry and with her family enjoys ballroom dancing, horseback riding and volunteering with Hands on Miami, a nonprofit organization which organizes community volunteer projects.

Overwhelmingly, Ventura is admired as a caring and passionate doctor. Nancy Sorokac, a fourth-year medical student at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine says that for her, Ventura is a role model. “In addition to her heart of gold, what makes Dr. Ventura unique is that she takes time to listen and offers sincere advice. She cares for the person as a whole.”



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