

A clear vision for Bascom Palmer Eye Institute

■ The chairman of Bascom Palmer Eye Institute weighs in on the healthcare debate and eye care in the Sunshine State.

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Over the course of 25 years, the doctors at Bascom Palmer Eye Institute had recorded just 10 cases of an eye infection associated with contact lenses. Then in the first three months of 2006, the institute recorded 34 cases of fungal keratitis in soft contact lens wearers.

Dr. Eduardo Alfonso, one of the institute's professors of ophthalmology at the time, and several colleagues documented the outbreak in medical journals — including information that 12 of the patients said they used the same brand of contact solution.

The articles and an investigation by the Centers for Disease Control led to an international recall of the solution.

Alfonso, who was appointed chairman of the institute this year, remains passionate about caring for the eyes of patients here and around the world.

"Vision is such an important part of everyone's life," he said. "Not to have it is a very significant change in one's quality of life."

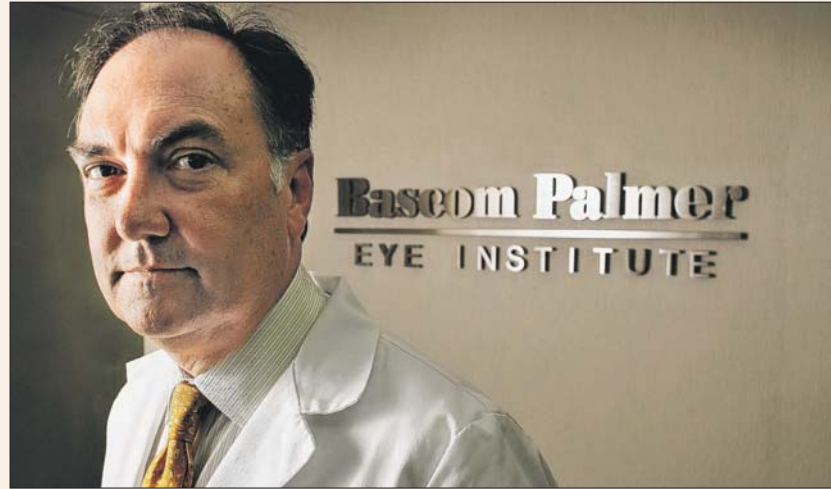
Alfonso spoke with The Miami Herald about the future of an institute already ranked the best eye hospital in the United States by U.S. News & World Report.

Q: Why did you become a doctor?

A: As every college student who has an interest in many areas, I wanted to study about everything.

I did have an interest in the sciences — psychology and biology I really liked. I became interested from an academic standpoint when I was an undergrad and doing work on the visual system as part of my psychology and biology track. And I decided that medical school was something I wanted to do. Even though I tried everything else, I was drawn back to the brain and how everything works.

I love it.



ALEX KOLYER/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

Dr. Eduardo Alfonso

Professional: Bascom Palmer chairman, professor and Kathleen and Stanley J. Glaser Chair in ophthalmology

Education: B.A., Yale College; M.D., Yale University School of Medicine; residency, Bascom Palmer Eye Institute at the University of Miami School of Medicine; fellowship in corneal and external diseases, Massachusetts Eye & Ear Infirmary at Har-

vard Medical School; ophthalmic pathology, David G. Cogan Eye Pathology Laboratory at Harvard Medical School; research, Howe Laboratory of Ophthalmology, Harvard Medical School

Age: 55

Personal: Married to Molly, with whom he has three children

Q: With the healthcare debate going on now, there is a national drive to lower costs. What are some of the initiatives at Bascom Palmer that you are working on to rein in some of those costs?

A: We work constantly on that. There are committees in our organization working on the outcomes of medical treatments and surgeries that we do to eliminate those that may not be as effective as others.

We are always looking not just at procedures and treatments, but medications that we use. We evaluate what is the effectiveness of an antibiotic, which is the most cost-effective antibiotic?

As the healthcare debate continues, we will continue to identify new areas where we want to make sure we provide the best quality care to the most number of patients.

Q: Related to those efforts is an

initiative to create an electronic medical records system. When might this debut? What are the benefits? What would you say to patients about how this information would be secured?

A: We actually explored the possibility of starting an electronic medical records system back in the mid- to late 1990s. We bought one. They were so crude when we tried to further develop it for ophthalmology; there was no interest out there.

Now, since we are a part of the University of Miami, they have made it part of their strategic plan to establish an electronic medical records system.

A company called Epic from Wisconsin is developing the system for the University of Miami and for Bascom Palmer.

We have multiple facilities where patients get seen — that's probably the most basic reason

for such a system. There is nothing more frustrating than seeing a patient and not being able to find their paper records. That happens. It's a small percentage, but records get misplaced.

And as patients, you get tired of filling out the same forms over and over again. I think that the electronic medical records will eliminate that.

In addition, the patient will be able to go on the Web and make their own appointment, change their appointment, get info from the doctor about how long a visit might last, what's going to be done. It will be a lot more interactive, and patients will have more ownership of their care.

All of these records are encrypted in a way that minimizes the possibility that any hacker can get into them, although nothing is as safe as you want it to be.

Q: Can you tell me more about how much of the institute's work is being furthered by federal stimulus dollars?

A: With the added funding, we have been able to supplement many of the existing grants. It's helped us hire new researchers and get some of these projects that may have taken a greater number of years near completion.

In the areas of infection and inflammation, we have projects that are trying to tackle how to minimize infections and treat inflammation in the eye. We'll make significant progress in next two to three years that otherwise would have taken five to 10 years.

Macular degeneration affects a great percentage of our elderly population.

We will also speed up research in the area of regeneration of the retina.

There are also proposals for new research the stimulus money could fund.

We're still waiting to hear about those.

Already, the institute has hired three research associates and an administrative support person using federal stimulus dollars, paid part of the salary of an existing co-investigator and expects to hire more people as new grants are won.

Q: Could you give us a few tips for people to keep in mind when it comes to protecting and caring for their eyes?

A: In South Florida, you want to consider protection from the sun.

Ultraviolet rays cause damage to surface of the eye that can lead to macular degeneration, cataracts and intraocular tumors.

One of the biggest problems we see at Bascom Palmer is people who engage in activities that can traumatize their eyes and they don't protect their eyes. Whether it's a tennis ball or a golf ball, you need to really think of wearing protective gear.

Or if you're working at home on any projects — nailing or doing anything like that.

Professional tennis players know what they are doing. But weekend hackers by the net — their fellow players might ram one at their face.