

PENN MEDICAL STUDENTS FIGHT GLAUCOMA IN PHILADELPHIA COMMUNITY



WHAT IS PENN SIGHT SAVERS?

Penn Sight Savers is a student-run program that offers free glaucoma screenings across Philadelphia to hundreds of patients a year. The group has three major missions: (1) to make eye care more accessible, (2) to educate people in the Philadelphia community on the necessity of regular vision checks, (3) to provide first and second year medical students with hands-on clinical experience.

Each spring semester, four first-year medical students work with Scheie glaucoma specialists to host screening stations at local health fairs and community events, usually in West Philadelphia. During the fall semester of their second year, members select and mentor four new students to take over in the spring.

Makayla McCoskey, the Chairperson of Perelman School of Medicine's Ophthalmology Student Interest Group, a Research Assistant at Scheie, and one of the second-year medical student leaders of Penn Sight Savers, described how the program operates and makes an impact.

HOW DO THE SCREENINGS WORK?

The students of Sight Savers run screenings under the supervision of Scheie glaucoma specialist Dr. Prithvi Sankar, the group's primary mentor, as well as Drs. Eydie Miller-Ellis and Victoria Addis.

The students transport equipment from Scheie to the site of the event. After setting up a table, they begin testing patients.

"A physician and a medical student will look at the back of the patient's eye. We will also do a visual field test, which is a quick and easy test to look for signs of glaucoma," said Makayla.

During the visual field tests, patients look at a screen and

push a button each time they see a dot. "If a dot comes up on the upper corner and you don't click, the computer thinks you didn't see it," Makayla explained. "And then it will come up again. If you click it this time you probably can see it. But if it comes up several times and you never see anything in this sliver of your vision, then that part of your vision may be gone."

The students discuss the results with Dr. Sankar, who uses the visual field test, a visual acuity test, and the photo of the back of the eye from an ophthalmoscope to assess the patient's vision.

WHAT CAN PATIENTS LEARN FROM THESE SCREENINGS?

Sight Savers' assessments inform patients when they should seek more advanced screenings and/or treatment. "We are going to let them know if we see something suspicious and if they need to get further care right away," Makayla said. "If Dr. Sankar sees something worrisome, he will specifically reach out to those patients and tell them to come in and make an appointment at Scheie."

Makayla added that regardless of the results of the screening, she and the other students talk with each patient about the importance of receiving yearly eye exams.

"I think a lot of people overlook how important vision care really is...if you are not experiencing vision loss, you probably won't realize it might be something to worry about," Makayla stated. "We are not only giving people a physical screening; we are also focusing on education."

SO, WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO GET A YEARLY EYE EXAM?

If detected early enough, glaucoma can be prevented from causing vision loss. However, without regular checkups, people can begin going blind before they realize they have glaucoma, and this damage is irreversible.

“Glaucoma is such a sneaky disease because it can go on for a long time and cause vision loss, but it’s in the periphery so you don’t notice you’re losing vision until the disease is pretty advanced,” explained Makayla. “You do need to get your eyes checked because something bad might be going on even if you haven’t noticed it yet.”

While Sight Savers screens for glaucoma, it is important for patients to attend annual appointments in ophthalmologist offices, which are fully-equipped for more comprehensive exams. Comprehensive eye exams not only reveal early signs of vision loss, they allow for diagnoses of a variety of systemic diseases. Chronic kidney disease, for example, has ocular manifestations that ophthalmologists can identify in images of the eye.

HOW HAS PENN SIGHT SAVERS MADE AN IMPACT?

Last semester, Sight Savers attended five health fairs in West Philadelphia, screening about 80 to 90 patients per fair. Many of these patients are considered part of a high-risk population for glaucoma.

“Being in West Philadelphia, many patients are African American. Glaucoma is five times more common and 15 times more likely to lead to blindness in the African American population,” Makayla pointed out.

Additionally, she explained that many of the people attending health fairs are uninsured, and rely on the services offered as

their primary source of care. “We see them for such a short period of time, it’s such a short vision check, but it’s valuable and it is something that people need and they want, even if they are not going in for full check-ups because they are not covered.”

HOW CAN STUDENTS GET INVOLVED?

In addition to its primary goal of making eye care and information accessible to the Philadelphia community, Penn Sight Savers provides a unique opportunity for first-year medical school students.

“It is such a great learning opportunity,” Makayla remarked. “From the medical student perspective it really allows us to gain clinical skills that we otherwise don’t get a chance to practice in the pre-clinical years when we are mostly sitting in a classroom and going to lecture.”

Penn Sight Savers is currently recruiting first year medical students, who will assume leadership roles when the current members (second years) go into clinics in January. “We have an application process. It’s really simple, just asking applicants to write a short paragraph saying why they want to be fully involved in Sight Savers,” said Makayla.

If you are interested in joining Penn Sight Savers or coordinating with Penn Sight Savers on an upcoming event, contact Makayla McCoskey at Makayla.McCoskey@uphs.upenn.edu.

