Bags and sags: More than skin deep

Droopy eyelids may point to more serious issues

When most people think about surgery for excess skin and puffiness around the eyes, they often immediately assume it is related to cosmetic concerns alone. But those sags and bags might also point to a medical problem.

Upper eyelid drooping can interfere with peripheral vision. Also, eyelid ligaments can relax so much that the eyelids turn outward and no longer protect the eye surface. Dry eyes are often related to eyelid laxity.

“Sagging or drooping eyelids can relate to a variety of issues,” said Dr. Jeremiah Tao, director of oculofacial plastic and orbital surgery. Besides aging or heredity, eyelid malposition can be due to nerve palsies, traumatic injuries, prior surgery and even cancer.

Dr. Jeremiah Tao, director of oculofacial plastic and orbital surgery
In some cases, eyelid problems point to underlying orbital disease. Orbital surgery deals with the bones and soft tissue that form an intricate system of support around the eyeball, Tao explained.

For instance, patients with overactive thyroid disease can experience puffy, bulging and irritated eyes. Permanent vision loss can occur due to damage to the optic nerve. By performing orbital decompression surgery, Tao is able to create more space to both alleviate the bulging appearance and protect the eye and optic nerve. Eyelid surgery is sometimes also indicated to fully restore ocular health.

Facial nerve problems like Bell’s palsy can impair normal blinking and prevent the eyelids from ever closing. “A paralyzed eyelid can cause serious problems for the eye,” Tao said. “We’ve developed surgeries that achieve better eyelid closure.”

Many patients also see Dr. Tao after botched cosmetic surgery. One recent patient came in after having multiple eyelid surgeries – the initial unsuccessful procedure followed by multiple attempts to fix the problem. She suffered persistent severe dryness, redness and blurry vision and was told by another doctor there was nothing more that could be done. Tao was able to restore the position of her eyes using techniques he pioneered.

In recognition of excellence in all aspects of oculofacial surgery, Tao’s program at UC Irvine Health Gavin Herbert Eye Institute is one of only several dozen nationally to receive accreditation from the American Society of Ophthalmic Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery (ASOPRS).

“The greatest satisfaction is hearing patients tell us how much better their eyes feel,” Tao said. “Improved cosmetic appearance is a bonus and often goes hand in hand with properly functioning eyelids.”

Community support key to our future

Gavin Herbert Eye Institute is fortunate to be part of a community that shares our passion for preserving sight. In this issue, you’ll learn how a few of our wonderful partners are impacting vision care in Orange County and beyond.

The Herbert family, responsible for the institute’s initial naming gift, provides the bookend that completes funding for our state-of-the-art facility. We thank them for a generous $500,000 pledge from the Josephine Herbert Gleis Foundation in memory of Marilyn E. Hausman (page 7).

Local children with undiagnosed vision issues have hope for a brighter future, thanks in part to the Nicholas Foundation. The foundation’s $100,000 grant helps put new pediatric mobile screening program on the road, providing services that identify and correct impairments that can impede learning (page 7).

You’ll also read about Cheryl and Richard Ruszat (page 4). The Ruszats are known for many things – the Montessori Schools of Irvine, their work as trustees for the UCI Foundation. The foundation’s $100,000 grant helps put a new pediatric mobile screening program on the road, providing services that identify and correct impairments that can impede learning (page 7).

Rundle and Hartman honored with awards for service

To honor the contributions of two faculty members, Gavin Herbert Eye Institute Drs. Herman Rundle and Ronald Hartman, received Lifetime Achievement Awards at the 9th Annual GHEI Colloquium. Rundle and Hartman have been educators, mentors and committed supporters of eye health for the last 53 and 55 years, respectively.
The couple was introduced to ophthalmologists at UC Irvine Health about 10 years ago when Richard developed an eye problem, and they’ve been grateful to their doctors ever since. Richard is under the care of Dr. Baruch D. Kuppermann for a retina condition and Cheryll underwent cataract surgery with Dr. Sumit Carg.

“We both feel very fortunate to be able to have these two amazing doctors,” Cheryll says. “The Gavin Herbert Eye Institute checks every box: the talent of the doctors, their skills, background and education. And when you go there, it’s like you’re in a resort. They treat you so well, with loving care.”

The Gavin Herbert Eye Institute opened in 2013, constructed entirely with private funding. Dr. Roger F. Steinert, the institute’s founding director, hoped to install flagpoles outside the Institute, and the Ruszats stepped up to help. Local Marines participated in the inaugural flag raising.

“It would be hard not to feel pride seeing the Marines raise the flag and hearing the speech by Dr. Steinert,” Richard says of the event. “The flags are a symbol of the environment where a group of leaders could have a dream to really create something very special. Through their inspiration, we have an eye institute that will benefit everyone.”

The Ruszats have turned to UC Irvine Health for all of their healthcare for many years, Cheryll adds. “We’re so fortunate to have healthcare like that in Orange County.”

DONOR PROFILE

Long-time supporters salute excellent healthcare

Ruszat Family’s $25K gift makes flagpoles possible

Cheryll and Richard Ruszat accept flags at the dedication.

Long-time UC Irvine supporters Cheryll and Richard Ruszat have donated $25,000 to the Gavin Herbert Eye Institute to install flagpoles outside the facility. The donation was recently recognized during a flag-raising ceremony that provided a finishing touch to the state-of-the-art, 70,000-square-foot facility.

The Ruszats, co-owners of the Montessori Schools of Irvine, have been champions of UCI for many years, opening the campus Montessori school and serving as trustees of the UCI Foundation since 2005. They have also been active on the UCI Medal Committee since 2003.

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PATIENT SPOTLIGHT

Living in the light

Macular degeneration no match for Merete Norballe’s spirit

Eight years ago, Merete Norballe was told by a doctor that she had age-related macular degeneration, “and there’s nothing you can do.”

But Norballe wasn’t about to accept that conclusion. Instead, she sought a second opinion at Gavin Herbert Eye Institute.

“Maybe I was born a little optimistic,” she said. “Part of my logic is not to be worried unless there’s a reason for it.”

Today, after years of treatment with ophthalmologists Dr. Baruch Kuppermann and Dr. Stephanie Lu, Norballe is happy to report that she just renewed her driver’s license.

Norballe, 81, has a lifetime of overcoming obstacles with determination and passion. As a child in her native Denmark, she attended a boarding school that was mostly boys – she was one of just a handful of girls competing for the highest marks. When she graduated, she became one of the youngest teachers in her town, and was offered a job as a principal at 19.

“I’ve been very fortunate to have lifelong training to be an eye patient,” she said. “It’s problem-solving and working with a lot of different people.”

Age-related macular degeneration is very common in the aging population and responsible for much of the irreversible vision loss experienced by those 50 and older. It affects the macula, the part of the retina responsible for viewing objects straight ahead – crucial for reading and driving.

“Age-related macular degeneration is considered incurable at this time, but there are a number of promising treatments to inhibit the disease,” said Lu, a retina specialist at GHEI.

One of those treatments has been helpful to Norballe – a monthly injection to slow the growth of new blood vessels behind the retina, which can hemorrhage and kill macular cells. She has received the injections in her left eye since her first diagnosis eight years ago, and has been able to function with relatively normal vision.

So when her right eye began to deteriorate suddenly two years ago, Norballe sprang into action and contacted GHEI. Lu discovered a submacular hemorrhage in Norballe’s eye and performed an emergency procedure.

“I was able to treat it successfully to have her vision returned to baseline,” Lu said. “It’s very gratifying to be able to help patients resume their normal lives.”

Now, Norballe receives injections in both eyes monthly, and can go about doing her favorite activities – driving her 1980 Volkswagen Rabbit to Trader Joe’s, and dancing in her living room. She keeps her apartment well-lit to help her see clearly.

“I love light,” she said. “It’s so much easier for me if I live in light.”

While Norballe does have trouble reading small print and won’t take the Rabbit out at night, she said she is very grateful to the physicians and staff at GHEI for enriching her life. She even made a donation to the 20/20 Society to show her support.

“They are my extended family,” she said. “They have given me the best chance to function optimally by planning, organizing and being creative.”

Stephanie Lu, MD
Assistant Clinical Professor, Department of Ophthalmology
Dry eye disease and why you should blink – often

UC Irvine researcher working with stem cells to identify a cure

Fifty percent of all individuals suffer from dry eye, and it’s the most common complaint among patients visiting eye specialists. With more time spent staring at screens, the incidence of dry eye is likely to increase — a trend that a researcher at UC Irvine Health is working to reverse.

Dr. James V. Jester, UC Irvine Health School of Medicine professor of ophthalmology and biomedical engineering, studies the causes and mechanisms of dry eye. One area of focus is the meibomian gland, which produces a protective oily substance that coats your eye when you blink.

“Often there is atrophy in the gland, which changes not only the amount of lipid released, but also the quality,” Jester said. “It should have an olive oil quality at best, but it can have a toothpaste quality at worst.”

Jester noted that environmental and lifestyle factors can lead to dry eye. For instance, spending time in a low humidity environment like an airplane can make you more susceptible, as can staring at a computer screen for long periods of time.

“Spending large amounts of time in an airplane cabin breaks down over time. Jester noted that the stem cells inside the gland can be lost due to repeated exposure to dry environments, leading to atrophy of the gland, causing the breakdown.”

“We’ve identified where these stem cells are and we are now studying what regulates their renewal,” he said. “Potentially, there may be some way to protect this stem cell population from being lost.”

Once patients have symptoms of dry eye, they basically have the disease, Jester said. He is hoping that his research will lead to a solution that restores meibomian gland function.

“It is difficult to study the eyelid,” he said. “I’m working with mice, and mice have tiny eyelids.”

Environmental causes of dry eye

• Exposure to smoke
• Windy and dry climates
• Driving, reading or staring at a computer screen for long periods of time
• Spending large amounts of time in an airplane cabin

Dr. James V. Jester, professor of ophthalmology and biomedical engineering
EVENTS

2016 Community Lecture Series
Gavin Herbert Eye Institute offers free lectures about eye health. No registration is required, but seating is limited. Join us!
Third Thursday of each month | 5:30 to 6:30 p.m.
Gavin Herbert Eye Institute, third floor conference room
850 Health Sciences Road, Irvine, CA 92697. Parking is complimentary.

Feb. 18: “Update on the Treatment and Prevention of Myopia” with Dr. Robert Lingua, Dr. Jennifer Che and Dr. Sumit Garg
March 17: “Cataracts” with Dr. Matthew Wade

For more information about the Gavin Herbert Eye Institute Lecture Series, please contact marketing director Archana Kaushal at akaushal@uci.edu.

Other events
April 1: Third Annual “Bench to Bedside” Symposium for physicians
April 25: “Cataract Surgery in 2016: A Miracle of Modern Medicine” Join ophthalmologist Dr. Sameh Mosaed for an in-depth discussion about cataracts and treating them surgically.
7 to 8 p.m. Newport Beach Public Library, 1000 Avocado Ave., Newport Beach, CA 92660. Event is free and seating is first come, first served. Doors open at 6:30 p.m.

Make an appointment
Gavin Herbert Eye Institute
850 Health Sciences Road
Irvine, CA 92697
Appointments: 949-824-2020
Optical Shop: 949-824-3260

UC Irvine Medical Center
101 The City Drive South, Pavilion II
Orange, CA 92868
Appointments: 714-456-7183

Make a donation
To learn more about how you can support us, contact Janice Briggs, executive director of development, at 949-824-0091 or jbriggs@uci.edu

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