

## **APAO Women in Ophthalmology (WIO) International Fellowship Program**

### **Pediatric Ophthalmology and Strabismus, Stein Eye Institute, UCLA**

Stephanie Suzanne S. Garcia, MD, DPBO

In April 2022, I began my time in sunny Los Angeles at the Stein Eye Institute at UCLA as an international fellow in Pediatric Ophthalmology and Strabismus under the guidance of Dr. Joseph Demer. I am extremely honored and grateful for the support from the APAO Women in Ophthalmology committee for this wonderful fellowship opportunity.

If you had to find me in Los Angeles, chances are that I would be at the pediatric clinic, the ocular motility lab, or at the operating rooms at the Stein Eye Institute. As an international fellow at UCLA, my time was spent between a healthy mix of research and clinical activities. Most of my research activities were conducted at the ocular motility laboratory, working with several engineers who specialize in ocular biomechanics, led by Dr. Demer. With the abundance of histological specimens available, I was able to conduct a histologic study on the connective tissue composition of the optic nerve. Working with MRI, OCT, OCT-A images, and computer modeling, members of the laboratory focused on different ways to exhibit the forces acting on the optic nerve when it is subjected to extraocular movement. It was a new and interesting experience for me to work with engineers in this aspect of strabismus research. I continue to be fascinated by all the new things I learn such as finite element analysis and digital image correlation during our weekly research meetings. In addition, I was also able to conduct a study on the effect of body position on IOP in children with our pediatric anterior segment specialist, Dr. Simon Fung. Being in an institution that values research and academic medicine really opened my eyes to the endless possibilities. One can't really help but feel grateful and motivated to be part of a multi-faceted team working in an incredible facility with all the resources at our fingertips.

With these studies, I was able to present posters at AAPOS 2023 in New York and ARVO 2023 in New Orleans. It was my first time attending both meetings and it was truly inspiring to see all the innovations in ophthalmology across the world. Of course, meetings are also perfect avenues to socialize with colleagues and peers. I met alumni of Pediatric Ophthalmology at Stein during AAPOS and grabbed a few drinks with fellow Filipino delegates at ARVO. I also had the honor of speaking at the Neurofibromatosis 2 /Schwannomatosis State of the Art Conference about the ocular manifestations in a roomful of NF2 experts.

In the clinics, I was exposed to general pediatric ophthalmology cases and a wide variety of both pediatric and adult strabismus. Some days were allotted for subspecialty sessions in Pediatric Neuro-ophthalmology with Dr. Stacy Pineles and Pediatric Cornea. I also worked closely with the retina fellows for ROP screenings with our pediatric retina attending, Dr. Irena Tsui. It was very exciting to have many opportunities for hands-on surgical experience with all the aforementioned attendings as well as Dr. Federico Velez, Dr. Monica Khitri, and Dr. Soh Youn Suh. Most OR days were filled with strabismus surgeries: everything from recessions, resections, plications, and transpositions to more complex surgery for Duane's syndrome, cranial nerve palsies, and recurrent strabismus. By assisting and performing surgeries, I was able to learn the nuances of each attending's approach in surgical planning and operative techniques. Being able to operate side by side with our incredible faculty was invaluable in developing my mastery and confidence in strabismus surgery.

More than the ophthalmology competencies that I have acquired during my stay here, I am even more grateful for the people I have met and known along the way. The OR and clinic staff never failed to make me feel welcome since day one. My stellar co-fellows reinforced in me the value of perseverance and collaborative work and I admired how they worked with such grace under pressure. Many days were spent with my wonderful labmates learning computer programming, discussing research over lunch, and scouting the best restaurants and coffee shops in LA. I was very lucky to work with some of the best people, and I am now even luckier to call them some of my closest friends. Finally, our attendings reminded me of the type of ophthalmologist I aim to be as I begin my career: a compassionate physician, a diligent researcher, and a patient, knowledgeable, and supportive mentor.

As my time in Southern California comes to a close, I look forward to coming home and being of service to the Filipino children. I am truly grateful to APAO for continuing to support and encourage young women in ophthalmology to pursue this path and excel in their chosen subspecialty. With this, I eagerly anticipate the opportunity to empower young Filipino ophthalmologists, fervently hoping to cultivate this culture of teaching and learning upon my return home.



*The women of Stein Eye Pediatric Ophthalmology with Dr. Joseph Demer  
(Dr. Monica Khitri, me, Dr. Tiffany Huang, Dr. Joseph Demer, Dr. Liane Dallalzadeh, Dr. Stacy Pineles, and Dr. Soh Youn Suh)*

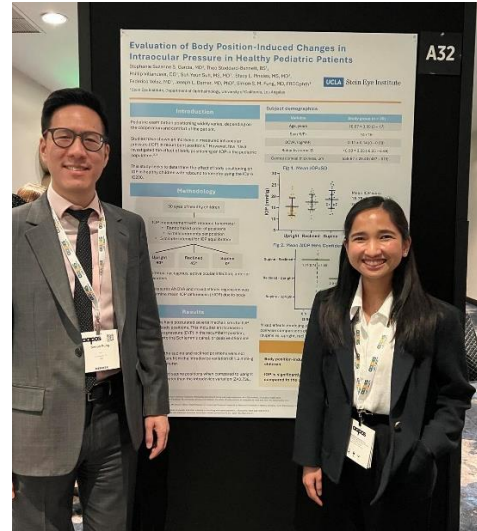
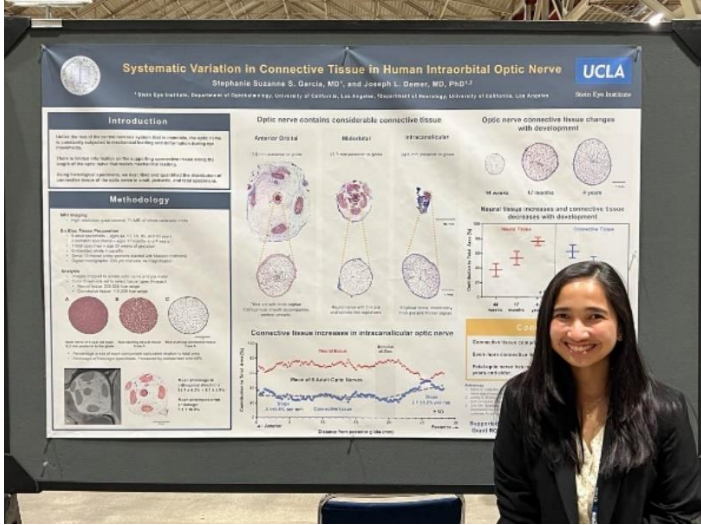


*Easter with the members of Demer lab  
(Somaye Jafari, PhD and family, Capt. Dooseop Song, MS and family, Joseph Demer, MD, PhD, Joseph Park, PhD, Andrew Tran, Seongjin Lim, MS, me, and Immi Lee)*

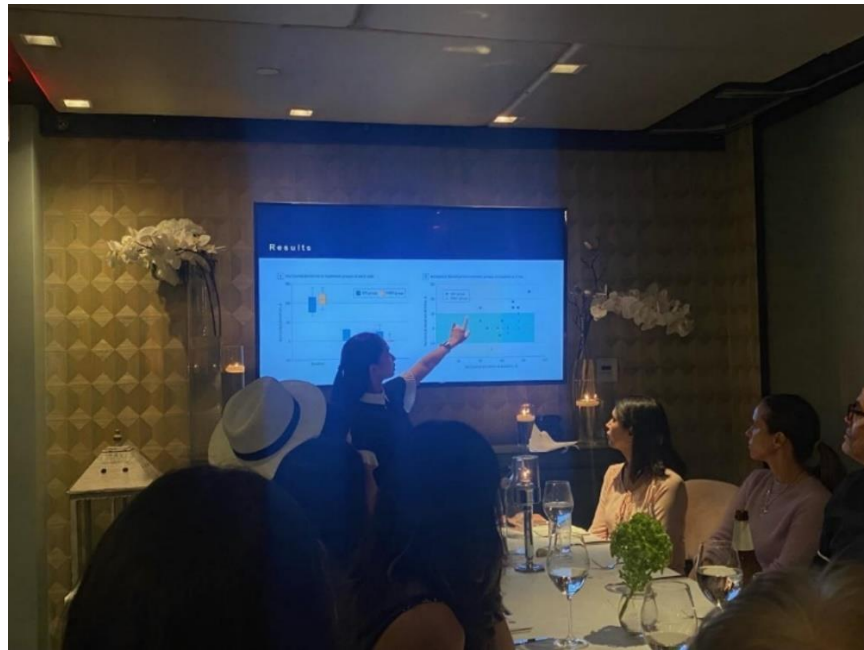


*Stein Eye Institute Fellows Class of 2023*





Poster presentations at ARVO 2023 in New Orleans and AAPOS 2023 in New York City with Dr. Simon Fung



Presenting at the CHLA-UCLA Pediatric Ophthalmology Journal Club



*Operating with Dr. Federico Velez*



*Operating with Dr. Joseph Demer and on the fellows' flight with Dr. Demer as pilot*



*Meeting up with Filipino delegates at ARVO 2023 and after-clinic celebrations with my co-fellows Dr. Wei-Yu Lai and Dr. Mona Fayad*