Estate gift from former patient funds diabetic retinopathy, other vision research at MCW

In appreciation for the care he received at the Froedtert & The Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW) Eye Institute, Charles F. Hofbauer established a planned gift known as a charitable remainder unitrust in 1996 to support retinal disease research. When he died in November 2012, the unitrust resulted in a donation of nearly $100,000 that will provide funding to faculty ophthalmologist Judy E. Kim, MD, for her diabetic retinopathy research and to the Eye Institute’s retinal research team.

“We deeply appreciate the thoughtful gift from Mr. and Mrs. Hofbauer, as well as memorial gifts from their family and friends,” said Dr. Kim, Professor of Ophthalmology. “These funds will ensure that research on diabetic retinopathy, which is one of the major causes of vision loss, can continue here at the Eye Institute. It is a perfect way to honor him, and his spirit will live on through our work. I was privileged to know and care for Mr. Hofbauer, an amazing person whose generosity and kindness are evidenced by this gift.”

Mr. Hofbauer was one of more than 25 million Americans affected by diabetes. And like 40 percent of diabetics 40 years or older, he developed diabetic retinopathy, which can pose a significant threat to sight. He benefitted from surgical procedures at the Eye Institute that restored his vision, and research conducted by MCW investigators like Dr. Kim will figure prominently in helping future patients preserve or recover their sight.

Dr. Kim’s efforts include leadership in the multi-site Diabetic Retinopathy Clinical Research Network as the principal investigator at MCW. The network, which is funded by the National Institutes of Health, has carried out more than 20 clinical trials, and Dr. Kim and her colleagues are able to bring those innovative treatments to patients at the Eye Institute.

Since vision loss can be prevented in many instances with earlier detection, Dr. Kim is also investigating better ways to obtain images of the eyes prior to the onset of diabetic retinopathy.

In addition, she has initiated a project that seeks to advance the management of diabetic retinopathy through improved screening using telemedicine. Barriers to care such as geography, economic status, or lack of education can be partially overcome through teleophthalmology because advances in noninvasive retinal imaging now allow the technology to be applied over distances.

Teaming with primary care physicians and endocrinologists, images can be acquired with a digital fundus camera and transferred to an ophthalmologist remotely through a secure server for interpretation, thereby saving time, controlling costs and increasing accessibility. Dr. Kim is also exploring teleophthalmology’s viability as a teaching tool for medical students and residents.

“Matched with Dr. Kim’s ingenuity and that of other retinal researchers at the Eye Institute, these funds will help enhance patient care, improve our understanding of retinal diseases and potential therapies, and foster educational capabilities in ophthalmology,” said MCW President and CEO John R. Raymond, Sr., MD. “We are honored that Mr. Hofbauer considered the Medical College so favorably in his estate plans.”

Charles Hofbauer founded the Serv-U Pharmacy chain that at one time was the largest chain of independent pharmacies in the state of Wisconsin with 22 stores. At the time that he established his charitable unitrust, he said: “It makes me feel good to know that I am playing a part in the progression of eye research and, thereby, in the quality of life for people who are at risk of losing their sight.”

Special opportunities

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Common destinations include the Froedtert Hospital Emergency Department, Flight for Life, BloodCenter of Wisconsin and the MCW anatomy laboratory.

AIM has served more than 183 students in the last 16 years.

“To our knowledge, AIM and ROADS are not duplicated anywhere in the Milwaukee area,” said Joseph E. Kerschner, MD, Dean of the Medical School and Executive Vice President.

“The Medical College of Wisconsin is committed to encouraging young people from diverse backgrounds to pursue careers in science and medicine, and we are tremendously pleased to have earned the support of the Jane Bradley Pettit Foundation in this objective.”

Funding from the Foundation primarily supports stipends for students enrolled in AIM and ROADS. The stipends help remove a barrier to participation by providing salary that a student might otherwise earn from a summer job.

“As diversity increases within the medical and scientific workforce, it strengthens the fields and provides greater relevance to the community,” said Dawn Bragg, PhD, Associate Dean of Student Affairs and Diversity and Associate Professor of Pediatrics. “The AIM and ROADS programs are great examples of how MCW is enthusiastically working to alter the norms of underrepresentation in the medical sciences.”

Jane Bradley Pettit established her foundation in 1985 to initiate and sustain projects that promote the welfare of families and children, the elderly and disadvantaged people in Milwaukee. Beyond her death in 2001, the Foundation continues to support people, programs and policy throughout the community.

“Our mission is to help children and the disadvantaged, and these programs help individual students,” said Lund, “but they also help the public because they possibly result in adding doctors and scientists to our community.”