Friedenwald Award and Lecture

Eliot L. Berson
Introduction of Eliot L. Berson, 1992 Friedenwald Award Winner

The man I have the pleasure of introducing to you today is no stranger to the Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology, nor, I suspect, to many members of this audience. Eliot Berson has devoted virtually his entire academic career to the understanding of one disease: retinitis pigmentosa. However, along the way he has made fundamental and important contributions to many areas of both basic and clinical visual science. Thus, he is very well known in both communities.

Spectacular progress has been made in the understanding of retinitis pigmentosa over the past 25 years and Eliot has had a hand in virtually all of this progress. Today we will hear an overview from Eliot on his work, and I do not wish to upstage his presentation, but I do want to mention three of his most significant accomplishments.

As a post-doctoral fellow in the 1960s at the National Institutes of Health, Eliot discovered that the electroretinographic b-wave is delayed in patients with retinitis pigmentosa, and that such altered electroretinograms (ERGs) may be detected even years before a patient develops clinical signs or symptoms of the disease. Thus, ERG testing has come to be fundamental for both the analysis and diagnosis of the disease. In the 1970s, Eliot established the Berman-Gund Laboratory at the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary, a multidisciplinary laboratory devoted to the study of retinal degenerations from anatomical, biochemical, and physiological points of view. He and his numerous coworkers have published on a variety of wide-ranging topics, but always with a focus toward an understanding of, and hopefully cure for, retinitis pigmentosa. And most recently, in the 1980s, taking advantage of the rapid advances in molecular genetics and the chromosomal localization of genes involved in certain forms of retinitis pigmentosa, he and Ted Dryja made the stunning discovery that point mutations in the rhodopsin gene are responsible for a dominant form of retinitis pigmentosa.

Eliot was born in Boston, graduated from Phillips Andover Academy, and received his B.S. from Yale in 1958. He received his M.D. from the Harvard Medical School, and after a residency at Washington University School of Medicine, spent 2 years at the National Institutes of Health as a Clinical Associate. He became an Instructor in Ophthalmology at the Harvard Medical School in 1968 and he has been at Harvard ever since. He was appointed Assistant Professor in 1971, an Associate Professor in 1976, and in 1982, he was named the William F. Chatlos Professor of Ophthalmology.

Eliot is widely respected by his colleagues, both in this country and abroad. This was impressively documented when Eliot was proposed for the Chatlos Professorship in 1981. Letters from around the world uniformly urged his appointment. Here is a small sample of those opinions:

“Dr. Berson is without a doubt one of the leading clinical researchers in the world in retinal degenerative disease and has an excellent reputation both as a researcher capable of attracting outstanding basic scientists as well as a clinician conducting excellent clinical research.”

“I have followed Dr. Berson’s work for over a decade, and consider him to be the most outstanding candidate available at this time to fill a post concerned with the study of retinal degeneration in general and retinitis pigmentosa in particular. He is one of the pioneers in this field, and has focused nearly all of his attention on this difficult field throughout his career as an academic ophthalmologist. Dr. Berson’s principal interest is in the physiology of vision and he has skillfully applied his great talent to both clinical problems as well as to basic research. He is a physician and a scientist with broad horizons, and appreciates the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to the general problem of retinal degeneration, especially those that are hereditary in nature. Thus, he has been successful in attracting research scientists with a wide spectrum of interests to collaborate with him. He has
provided the facilities, equipment, budget, and inspiration that has made the Berman-Gund Laboratory the leader in the field of the study of retinal degeneration."

"Dr. Eliot Berson has done an outstanding job at the Berman-Gund Laboratory since its inception. His clinical and basic science knowledge in this field, his direction of the entire laboratory, and his thoughtful and thought-provoking articles over the past decade would make him an obvious selection."

"In regard to candidates for the Chatlos Professorship, it is difficult to think of an ophthalmologist who has devoted his career as completely as Dr. Eliot L. Berson has to the clinical and laboratory study of the human inherited retinal degenerative diseases. It is equally difficult to think of any senior level academic ophthalmologist who has his record of investigation of normal and diseased retinas."

Eliot has received many honors for his work, including the Honor Award of the American Academy of Ophthalmology, the Franceschetti Award from the International Society of Genetic Eye Diseases, the Taylor Smith Award of the New England Ophthalmological Society, and the Man of Vision Award from the National Society to Prevent Blindness. He lectures widely and writes prolifically.

It is with enormous pleasure that I present to you the 1992 Friedenwald Award winner, Eliot L. Berson.

John E. Dowling