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Escape Route

Follow these directions to find balance and avoid burnout.

By ROCHELLE NATALONI, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

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Do you live to work or work to live? The choice each of us makes with regard to this seemingly simple question speaks volumes about our priorities in life. This month, Premium Practice Today takes a look at the person beyond the surgeon. Contributing Editor Rochelle Nataloni gives us a glimpse into the personal lives of a handful of ophthalmic surgeons from around the United States. As you read their stories, I hope you are inspired to continue pursuing your own dreams outside of your daily role in ophthalmology (which remains, as measured by the impact on patients' lives, at the top of all medical specialties).

—Section Editor Shareef Mahdavi

Becoming a surgeon and developing a successful practice typically leave little time for exploring personal pursuits. The most successful cataract and refractive surgeons, however, soon find that all work and no play can lead to burnout and personal dissatisfaction. According to a recent study, to achieve peak life satisfaction, surgeons must define the proper work-life balance for themselves and nurture wellness strategies.¹ The study's authors found that financial success, professional recognition, personal hobbies, and familial involvement can be competing interests.

"Some individuals believe they can have it all and pursue all activities with equal passion, but this is often a recipe for dissatisfaction," says psychotherapist and relationship expert Mary Pender Greene. "They must determine which personal and professional goals are most important and prioritize their

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decisions. They need to discover what energizes them and brings them joy, wholeness, peace of mind, centeredness, and a deep sense of personal fulfillment and satisfaction—other than work.”

In a profession that requires perfection, such as ophthalmology, doing things that feel adventurous or just impulsive can create a good sense of balance, according to Julie Melillo, a Manhattan-based life coach. “Surgeons often need a way to let loose outside of work,” she says. “Riding a motorcycle to the office; taking part in an extreme sport such as snowboarding, hang gliding, or rock climbing; or even making an occasional impulsive decision can all be good things for surgeons. Physical activities can also help undo stress that accumulates during long work hours, helping to nurture a healthy body and mind.”

Interviews with a handful of premium surgeons offer a cross-section of exciting pastimes and interests that they say provide a sense of balance, excitement, and escape—as well as a certain *je ne sais quoi*—that rains positive dividends down on their practice, whether through a spring in their step, a smile on their face, or inner peace that is reflected in a happy staff and satisfied patients.

LEAVING ON A JET PLANE

William J. Fishkind, MD

Fishkind, Bakewell & Maltzman Eye Care and Surgery Center, Tucson, Arizona

Lots of children look up at the sky and fantasize about soaring through the air above everyone and everything, impervious to the limitations imposed by gravity (and age). William J. Fishkind, MD, was not such a boy. The thought of flying never crossed his mind. Once his ophthalmic training was complete and he was ensconced in a successful practice, however, a newspaper advertisement containing three little words caught his eye: *free flight lesson*. For a reason that he cannot quite articulate, he asked himself, “Why not?”

That moment changed his life. Dr. Fishkind remembers, “The instructor showed me the air speed indicator and explained that, when it reached about 60 knots, I should gently pull back on the yoke. Then, he pushed the throttle in, and the plane started gathering speed as it went down the runway. All of a sudden at 65 knots, the plane lifted off the ground, and I was flying. I immediately thought, ‘This is the coolest thing I have ever done.’ At that magical moment, I knew I was going to fly airplanes.” It was love at first flight.

Today, Dr. Fishkind has his pilot’s license, owns his own plane, and is instrument rated, which qualifies him to fly in inclement weather without seeing the ground using radar and the global positioning system, among other things. His custom-designed plane, a Tradewind Turbine Bonanza, has a jet engine. “This design makes it extremely reliable, safe, and fast. It easily will fly 200 to 250 miles per hour,” explains Dr. Fishkind.

One of his most memorable flights took him back to his boyhood home. He says, “I flew to New York, and when I approached Manhattan, the air traffic controllers started to reroute me around the ocean, so I called the flight controller and explained that I grew up in New York and that, for as long as I could remember, I [had] wanted to fly around the Statue of Liberty and over my hometown. He told me to stand by and then routed me around the Statue of Liberty and the East River, along Manhattan and over La Guardia airport, across Long Island Sound, and then over my hometown of Great Neck. That

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was before 9/11. There is no way that they would let someone do that today, so it was an incredible opportunity.”

Although Dr. Fishkind cannot pinpoint what initially drew him to flying, he knows what keeps him coming back. “It provides a great escape,” he explains. “[We] physicians tend to be very compulsive about the work that we do. We need to get away mentally and sometimes physically from the stresses of ophthalmology. Flying adds to my sense of emotional well-being, and it allows me to jump those vast geographical expanses imposed by living in Tucson and do things like go to Sedona for lunch.”

HOOKED ON A FEELING

Audrey Talley-Rostov, MD

Northwest Eye Surgeons, Seattle

Cornea specialist Audrey Talley-Rostov, MD, always enjoyed athletic pursuits and being active outdoors, but like many surgeons who are also mothers, free time was like pie in the sky. “After my son was born, all of my time was devoted either to my practice or to being a mom,” she recalls. “[Although] these are both incredibly important things, I had no time left for anything else. Eventually, I made finding time a priority, and I started swimming and cycling again to get back in shape and to have some personal time.”

Soon, a friend suggested a triathlon, and Dr. Talley-Rostov was off and running—literally. “I signed up for a sprint triathlon and started a training regimen, which forced me to organize my schedule to allow training time each day,” she says. “I completed my first triathlon 13 years ago and was hooked. I like the discipline of the three sports: swimming, biking, and running. I do at least one to two races/events each year, mostly triathlons but also half marathons, 5- to 10-k runs, and bike rides.” Two of her notable events include Mt. Ventoux, one of the stages of the Tour de France, and the Seattle-to-Portland ride.

Dr. Talley-Rostov wakes up at 5:30 AM every day and runs 5 miles and/or does strength training before work. “A personal trainer comes to my house twice a week,” she says. “I swim with a Masters-coached swim group two to three times a week. I catch a spin class during lunch twice a week, attend a yoga class on Saturday morning after a Masters swim workout, and ride on Sunday mornings with a women’s cycling team.”

Triathlons and physical exercise challenge her in a different way than the intellectual situations that she faces in the OR and the office. “The sheer physicality of running, swimming, and cycling is great for destressing and also for enabling me to process information,” she explains. “Some of the emotional and psychological preparations for a race also translate to helping me to prepare for a difficult surgical case and/or a long day in the OR or clinic.”

“Everyone benefits from the emotional perks of my exercise routine: me, my office staff, my husband, and my kids,” says Dr. Talley-Rostov. “I am much calmer, happier, and more balanced when I exercise. I encourage our office staff to exercise, and we have participated as a team in 5-k runs together. I make a great brunch afterwards!”

LOVE GAME

Stephen Coleman, MD

Coleman Vision Institute, Albuquerque, New Mexico

Refractive surgeon Stephen Coleman says he cannot remember a time when tennis was not a part of his life. “I grew up across the street from seven public tennis courts in upstate New York, and my mother was a tennis champion,” he says. “I can’t remember anything from when I was young that did not involve a tennis racket. I dreamed of playing professionally but realized early on that I wasn’t up to par. So, I settled for being captain of my college team and teaching lessons on the side while in medical school at Georgetown.”

Tennis became a family activity—a pastime to share with his wife, whom he met on a tennis date, and their children. “Here in New Mexico, we have the opportunity to play year-round, so we use it as a frequent, but casual, family activity. Particularly around the time of the Grand Slam [tournaments], after watching a match, one of us is usually itching to get out and start hammering on some balls,” he says.

The casual family activity eventually morphed into much more. “New Mexico was a Virginia Slims Tour stop for women’s professional tennis back in the day when smoking was common,” he explains. “Wellknown tennis pros came here regularly, but when that sponsorship ended, the state was left with no professional tennis. My wife suggested that we pick up the sponsorship, and we have now been at it for 14 years. It’s been rated as one of the top three tournaments by the United States Tennis Association every year since.”

The tournament is directed toward youths. “We have 700 middle school students at the tournament for 2 days of the weeklong event, playing games with the pros and having fun,” he says. “This aspect of the tournament is what really resonates with my patients. They know that we are committed to the community, and frequently, prospective patients will thank me for sponsoring the tournament. For me, this is a labor of love. I don’t perform LASIK during the week of the tournament, and my entire staff gets behind all of the activities. We have had Native American tennis clinics, wheelchair clinics, and the first Sunday of the tournament is always the Governor’s Cup, geared toward children.”

Dr. Coleman points out that surgeons’ outside interests can enhance the overall performance of their practices. “The key really is to find an activity that allows self-fulfillment and casts a positive light on the practice as well,” he says. “Love music? Support the local junior symphony, take your staff to a concert or two, and stick with it. Is painting a hobby? Hang a painting from a local artist in the lobby every month or so. There are plenty of avenues, and it can be fun.”

ON THE ROAD AGAIN**John Vukich, MD***Davis Duehr Dean Center for Refractive Surgery, Madison, Wisconsin*

Cataract and refractive surgeon John Vukich is an avid road biker. “Riding a bike is something almost all of us learn to do as a child,” he says. “I got interested in biking, because my knees hurt from running, and I was looking for something else that would provide a level of aerobic activity. Road biking was the perfect choice for me. Walking and running are too slow, and racing cars is too fast. Bikes provide the sensation of the wind in your face and the air running past your body, and you can smell the countryside and hear what’s going on around you. It’s a very soothing, very relaxing way to tour, and once you get to a certain level, it can provide quite strenuous exercise.”

Dr. Vukich has clearly reached that level. When the weather permits, he rides between 100 and 200 miles per week. “During the week, I get up at 5:30 in the morning and ride for 1 hour to 1 1/2 hours. On the weekends, I get up early and do an even longer ride, anywhere from 40 to 80 miles a day,” he explains.

One of the advantages of biking, he points out, is its flexibility. “When the time is available, you don’t need a partner to play against or a tee time to set up,” he notes. “You can ride solo or with a group to enjoy friendly camaraderie or even friendly competition among peers.”

Everybody has daily tensions and stressors, Dr. Vukich says, but with physicians in particular, it is easy to be consumed by [your] practice and to lose yourself in the process. Biking provides an emotional counterbalance for him. “Physical activity is soothing and provides a release from the tensions that come with decision making and responsibility,” he says.

Dr. Vukich has incorporated biking into vacations with his wife; they have toured Vietnam, New Zealand, Croatia, Hawaii, and France by bike with trips planned by Trek Travel. He says that having a personal passion— particularly one that is physical in nature—provides subtle but real collateral benefits to his practice. “If you come into work with a little better attitude, with a bounce in your step, I think it affects how you interact with your patients and probably your staff,” he says. “If you come in rumpled and stressed and not engaging, that will be reflected in how your staff treats patients as well.”

Dr. Vukich has been biking for 10 years and has no plans to taper his efforts any time soon. He says, “I like having something in front of me that motivates me to train, something that motivates me to get up when it might be easier to hit the snooze button.”

PIANO MAN

Kenneth J. Rosenthal, MD

Rosenthal Eye Surgery, Great Neck, New York

Kenneth J. Rosenthal, MD, is a Julliard-trained pianist. When he plays the piano, he says he feels challenged in ways that dwarf even the most complicated surgical case.

“Playing the piano provides an emotional peak that cannot easily be duplicated by anything else. I lose myself in the oasis of the music,” Dr. Rosenthal explains. In addition to the joy that playing brings him, his avocation offers other benefits. “Learning new music challenges my intellect and keeps my cognitive skills at their prime,” he adds.

One of Dr. Rosenthal’s high points as a pianist came in 2006 when, at the encouragement of Spencer Thornton, MD, his friend and mentor, he performed at the Hawaiian Eye Meeting after a hiatus in public performance spanning almost 2 decades. “There were 850 people in the audience, and I conquered a lifelong battle with stage fright and received a standing ovation for my performance of Chopin’s Fantasy Impromptu,” recalls Dr. Rosenthal. “My stage fright was completely absent throughout the performance and from then on.”

1. Shanafelt T.A career in surgical oncology:finding meaning,balance,and personal satisfaction.*Ann Surg Oncol.*2008;15(2):400-406.

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