

RUTH D. WILLIAMS, MD

Of Lasting Happiness and Ophthalmology Friends

For ophthalmologists, most of the losses in 2020 are modest and manageable. But they are cumulative. One loss I'm noticing more as the COVID months drag on is that of meeting face-to-face with my ophthalmology colleagues.

My last restaurant meal before the March shutdown was a festive gathering of ophthalmologists before a state society meeting. Our conversations were substantial and lively, covering such diverse topics as private equity, HR challenges, the proposed changes to the E/M codes, the Arkansas referendum on optometric surgery, and what might happen with this brand-new pandemic.

And in July, my first social outing was with four Chicago ophthalmologists to celebrate a colleague's new job. In order to socially distance, we met outside on a rooftop patio. This time, the gathering was both joyful and poignant. These aren't just colleagues; they are friends.

I remember, when I was a young ophthalmologist, someone describing his 40-year friendship with Fred Blodi, a former ophthalmology chair at the University of Iowa.¹ While I don't recall who the speaker was, I'll never forget the value he placed on that friendship. At that point, I was still moving around for training and couldn't quite imagine a work friend of that significance and duration. Now, I too have multidecade ophthalmology friendships. And even though I see some of these friends only a few times a year—or even once every few years—it always feels like a grand reunion.

What makes colleague relationships meaningful, strong, and enduring? First, we spend a lot of time together. Most of us are at work more waking hours than we are at home. Once in practice, we might work alongside the same people for decades. We don't reflect on it much, but our quotidian conversations, our interdependence, and our common goals can bind us together in friendship. The first time I noticed this was when the father of one of my partners died. A retina specialist and I drove more than two hours to South Bend for the funeral. While I expected we'd be the only ophthalmologists there, I was stunned to see a half dozen of my partners.

Then, there's our shared experience. Without explaining, we know what it's like to work at the county hospital or the VA, take the oral boards, manage a demanding patient, or

show up for 7 a.m. surgery following a 2 a.m. trauma call. We share a collective groan when, after canceling patients to attend a third-grade school play, it's moved to a new date at the last minute. While each story is different, when told among colleagues, none is unique. Ophthalmologists relate to these experiences in a way that most of our relatives and neighbors can't. I call these friends "my neighborhood," since I see them more often than most of my physical neighbors.

I also rely on my colleagues for guidance. Over the years, several—Steve Park, Harry Lebowitz, Greg Skuta, Andrew Iwach, and Chris Albanis—have shared advice and stories about managing a practice. During this pandemic, I've noticed how much I've relied on their experience and wisdom. This is friendship.

Finally, let's not forget our celebrations. For instance, I tallied five ophthalmology events with dancing that couldn't happen in 2020. The best is, of course, the elegant and very fun Orbital Gala at the annual meeting. (Fortunately, this is *still* happening this year at AAO 2020 Virtual; register at aao.org/gala). Why do we come together in this way? It's a nod to our innovative, energetic culture, and an acknowledgment of the joy of doing meaningful and challenging work.

The Greek philosopher Epicurus wrote and taught about finding happiness (and, perhaps, contributed to general happiness by allowing women into his philosophy school). In his 27th Sovereign Maxim, Epicurus wrote, "Of all the things that wisdom provides to ensure happiness throughout the whole of life, the greatest by far is the possession of friendship."



Ruth D. Williams, MD
Chief Medical
Editor, EyeNet

1 For more on Dr. Blodi, see aao.org/senior-ophthalmologists/scope/article/frederick-blodi-MD.