

*With 50 ophthalmologists in four generations, The Azar/Ellis/Haik family may be writing the book on how to follow in Dad's footsteps. No one ever wonders, Is there a doctor in the house?*

# LOUISIANA'S LEGENDARY Ophthalmology Family

BY PAT PHILLIPS, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

## A FAMILY WITH DIOPTERS IN ITS BLOOD

"The practice of ophthalmology is an autosomal dominant gene in our family," said Paul J. Azar Jr., MD, chairman of ophthalmology at Louisiana State University Medical Center in Lafayette, La. "We become ophthalmologists." Dr. Azar Jr. was referring to a legacy of eye medicine that began over a century ago and spans four generations of three interlaced families: the Azar family, the Ellis family and the Haik family.

"Our extended family is joined by our cultural heritage—Lebanon is our country of origin—as well as by our medical heritage," said George S. Ellis Jr., MD, a pediatric ophthalmologist and director of ophthalmology at Children's Hospital in New Orleans. "Our grandfathers were the ones who emigrated to the United States from Lebanon," he added.

Barrett G. Haik, MD, who serves on the Academy board of trustees, is chairman of ophthalmology at the University of Tennessee Health Science Center and chief of

ophthalmology at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis. He represents the second generation on one side and the third generation on another side of the extended family.

"We do have a few autosomal recessive nonophthalmologist physicians in our family as well," laughed Dr. Ellis Jr. He was referring to some renegades who have pursued other careers in medicine: psychiatry, anesthesiology, pulmonology and family practice.

Collectively, since family members first

started practicing in the 1900s, Dr. Azar Jr. estimated they have treated millions of patients. He himself has been practicing for 37 years, uninterrupted, leading him to estimate he has 30,000 individual patient charts in his practice. He said the extended family has also helped educate thousands of ophthalmology residents and fellows. "Most of us are or have been teachers," said Dr. Ellis Jr.

"Ophthalmology is a combination of hard work, skill and availability for the treatment of patients," Dr. Azar Jr. said. "We have dedicated our lives to helping people with eye problems and getting their problems fixed in a timely fashion."

### FROM THE OLD COUNTRY TO THE NEW

The first in one family branch to become an ophthalmologist was George Haik Sr., MD. As founding ophthalmology patriarch of the Haik family, he graduated from Tulane University School of Medicine in the 1930s, where he was quarterback on the Rose Bowl Football team. He served in North Africa as a trauma physician and

later was a member of the Tulane ophthalmology faculty. He became chairman of ophthalmology at Louisiana State University School of Medicine in the 1940s. Dr. Russell Saloom, an ophthalmic plastic surgeon practicing in Baton Rouge, La., is the son of one of Mrs. George Haik Sr.'s physician brothers. Dr. Saloom trained with Dr. Ellis Jr. at LSU and Dr. Barrett Haik when he was at Tulane.

George Ellis Sr., MD, who was Dr. Haik Sr.'s brother-in-law, was born in Almonsf, Lebanon, just three months before his parents immigrated to the United States. "My father used to joke that when he came to this country, he didn't have a penny to his name and couldn't speak a word of English," Dr. Ellis Jr. said. He trained at Tulane and was Herman Burian's first strabismus fellow.

Dr. Azar Jr. represents the third generation of the extended family of practicing ophthalmologists. His grandfather, James A. Azar, MD, was the first ophthalmologist in that family. He began practicing in New Orleans in 1911. Paul Azar Sr., MD, began



ONE BRANCH OF AN EXTENDED FAMILY TREE: James A. Azar, MD; Paul J. Azar Sr., MD; John M. Azar, MD; Paul J. Azar Jr., MD; Susan E. Azar, MD.

practicing in 1935. And Dr. Azar Jr.'s daughter Susan E. Azar, MD, is the first ophthalmologist in the fourth generation and the first woman in the family to become an ophthalmologist. She is on the faculty of Louisiana State University Medical Center, in Lafayette.

## PLAYPENS AND TONOPENS

The plethora of Eye M.D.s in the entire extended family—including fathers, sons, daughters, brothers, first and second cousins, uncles and nephews and other relationships through marriage—adds up to about 50 ophthalmologists over the four generations.

New Orleans has been the focus of the

education and practice of the majority of family members. Tulane and LSU have drawn many of them as students, then as faculty members, and, in some instances, as chairmen of ophthalmology.

Dr. Ellis Jr. and Dr. Barrett Haik, about five months apart in age, shared the same playpen as infants, and went to nursery school, grammar school and high school together. Later, Dr. Haik joined the ophthalmology faculty at Tulane. When Dr. Ellis Jr. left the ophthalmology faculty at LSU to join the faculty at Tulane, they practiced together for about five years. To this day, they remain best friends. Their fathers practiced together for more than 40 years.

## EYE M.D.S: On the Battlefield and Beyond

Operations in Afghanistan and Iraq offer a new set of challenges for ophthalmologists working for the Department of Defense (DoD) and in the Department of Veterans Affairs Administration (VA).

Eye wounds treated in today's military operations are more complex than those sustained in previous wars, said Anthony J. Johnson, MD, LTC, MC, who will be copresenting at a free special session devoted to the experiences of ophthalmologists in the DoD and VA. The major cause of eye injury is foreign bodies from blast debris, said Dr. Johnson, who is associate program director of cornea and refractive surgery at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio. And though soldiers' body armor protects their internal organs, it does not protect the face or the eyes.

"We are able to treat wounds and eye disease more effectively with the arrival of vitrectomy and glaucoma drainage devices, small incision instruments, cataract techniques, corneal transplantation and IOL advances," Dr. Johnson said. "This occurs, however, at the cost of additional follow-up

and more secondary procedures."

More soldiers are entering the VA at a younger age than in previous operations, and they are returning to the United States with a broader range of injuries, including post-traumatic stress disorder, mental illness and traumatic brain injury, said James Orcutt, MD, PhD, chief of ophthalmology and director of the Eye Care Program at the Veterans Affairs Puget Sound Health Care System in Seattle. "A lot of times with these conditions, many eye diseases or injuries go undiagnosed or untreated," he said.

Dr. Orcutt, who also will be speaking at Monday's session, has been with the VA for more than 25 years and serves as program director for ophthalmology in the VA. He said that a top priority is to get veterans properly screened and routed to appropriate care through the transition process.

Drs. Orcutt and Johnson agreed that the DoD and VA are working to improve patient flow from one entity to another and to ensure that patients are receiving quality care.

### DoD-VA: Ophthalmology on the Front Lines—Treating America's Heroes

Monday, 12:15 to 1:45 p.m.; Room 274; free—no ticket required.

Presented by the Academy's Federal Affairs Department.



Dr. Johnson (far left) and colleagues with a family that was caught in a cross fire.

## FOLLOWING IN DAD'S FOOTSTEPS (AND PHOROPTERS)

"My father most influenced me to go into ophthalmology," said Dr. Ellis Jr. "I used to make rounds with him on inpatient postop cataract patients. He was an innovator in eye surgery with a special interest in strabismus. He was one of the first to do a live television feed of surgery at a major medical meeting back in the 1960s. It was a live cataract operation during the Southern Medical Association meeting."

Haik parenting had a similar effect. "You might say Dr. George Haik Sr. had a strong influence on his offspring. He had three sons, George Jr., Kenneth and Barrett, all of whom became ophthalmologists. His only daughter, Suzanne Haik Terrell, followed the other major family trend by becoming an attorney. She did, however, marry an ophthalmologist, Dr. Lee Terrell, a classmate of mine at Tulane medical School," said Dr. Ellis Jr.

Dr. Azar Jr. also was influenced by his father to go into the field. He also said that his first cousin, Robert Azar, MD, who started practicing in 1952, was an "inspiration to me and to others in our family." At 78, he is the oldest living ophthalmologist in the family. He is now retired but continues to live in New Orleans.

"Ophthalmology is a good and noble and productive life," Dr. Azar Jr. said. "Sons often want to follow the profession of their fathers. And now daughters, too." His own son, Paul Azar III, is now attending LSU School of Medicine and will graduate next year.

The daughter of Dr. Ellis Jr. is considering surgery as a career. She is a student at Wake Forest University.

## RECORDS OF ACHIEVEMENT

Many family members have accumulated a remarkable record of achievement—as authors, practitioners, researchers and educators.

Dr. George Haik Sr., who became chairman of ophthalmology at LSU, is the author of a book on ocular trauma, which he wrote based on his World War II experiences. He was also the first physician in the South to perform a corneal transplant, in 1943, at Charity Hospital in New Orleans. His patient was a boy who was splashed in the face with lye by his girlfriend.

Dr. Barrett Haik is a strong innovator in ocular oncology. He is a specialist in the diagnosis and treatment of cancers in and around the eye, and is a world expert on Coats' disease. He is the author of more than 100 journal reports and 45 book chapters, and is now involved in an outreach program to save children's sight in



Dr. George S. Ellis Jr.

Panama through the use of telemedicine.

Dr. Ellis Jr. is a specialist in forced choice preferential looking. In 1983, he introduced Botox to Louisiana for the treatment of strabismus. He holds special interests in strabismus, amblyopia and pediatric ptosis.

At present, Dr. Ellis Jr. is president of the Southern Medical Association and has served as president of various specialty societies, such as the American Association for Pediatric Ophthalmology and Strabismus and the New Orleans Academy of Ophthalmology.

Dr. Azar Jr. pioneered the first intraocular lens techniques in Louisiana in 1974, as well as becoming an early embracer of YAG laser secondary techniques and radial keratotomy techniques.

In the future, new generations of this family will continue to enrich ophthalmology. As Dr. Ellis Jr. said, "We are probably the largest practicing family of ophthalmologists in the United States. We're all proud of being able to take care of so many individuals in a compassionate, patient-oriented way."



Dr. Barrett G. Haik

## GENERATIONAL OPHTHALMOLOGY

If the story of the Azar/Ellis/Haik family tickled you, don't miss the **Museum of Vision** display (Hall G, Booth #3347) at this year's Meeting. One of the Museum's offerings is an affectionate and fascinating look at the many families which have nurtured ophthalmologists across multiple generations.