A Legacy of Excellence

The Transformative Leadership of Dr. Eduardo Alfonso

"Dr. Alfonso led Bascom Palmer to a higher pinnacle in education, patient care, and research than could have been imagined. In all three of our departmental missions we are clearly "second to none." I can think of no one who could have provided more collaborative and courageous leadership through the last 20 years. The faculty has increased not only in number but in quality. Our house staff remains the best in every category including diversity. Educational programs are simply without peer and our research faculty and programs have steadily improved. All of these accomplishments occurred in a time when we experienced a pandemic, and while the medical school and university leadership turned over several times. No one since Dr. Norton has led our department as well. It is difficult to become the best and an even greater challenge to not only maintain the excellence but continue to improve. This is Dr. Alfonso's legacy."

- John G. Clarkson, M.D.,
Former Bascom Palmer chair; Former dean,
University of Miami Miller School of Medicine

For 18 years, Eduardo C. Alfonso, M.D., has led the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute with unwavering dedication to its mission of excellence. Since being named chair of the Department of Ophthalmology for the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine and director of the Institute in 2007, he has guided the nation's top ophthalmology program through a transformative era. As he now transitions from these leadership roles, Alfonso will continue serving on the faculty and stewarding Bascom Palmer until his successor is chosen.

"Bascom Palmer's clinical, research, educational, and community service programs are thriving, making this an ideal time for a leadership transition," said Alfonso, who holds the Kathleen and Stanley J. Glaser Chair in Ophthalmology. "I look forward to expanding my patient care and deepening relationships with the donors who are so vital to advancing our mission." In keeping with this renewal focus, he recently extended his board certification in ophthalmology through 2035. "I will continue helping patients dealing with complex cornea disease or infection, as well as those seeking second opinions on challenging vision conditions," he said.

A commitment to medicine



Born in Cuba, Alfonso grew up in Puerto Rico, where he attended a Jesuit high school that encouraged his intellectual curiosity. "I could have joined the family business, but I wanted to go to college and explore a potential career in psychology or neuroscience," he said. As a junior at Yale College, Alfonso was encouraged to apply to medical school, and was accepted into Yale Medical School after receiving his bachelor degree *summa cum laude*, Phi Beta Kappa. But Alfonso delayed entry for a year, so he could conduct a study on the availability of behavioral care for the community's Latin population. The study also gave him an opportunity to build administrative and community outreach skills. He also married his high school sweetheart, Molly. After 50 years of marriage, the Alfonsos have three children, two sons-in-law, and five grandchildren.

As a medical student at Yale, Alfonso chose a career in ophthalmology, with encouragement from his mentor, Caleb Gonzalez, M.D., a professor of pediatric ophthalmology. "I fell in love with the field, and decided on a career in academic medicine," he said. "For my residency, I applied to several schools in the Northeast, as well as Bascom Palmer."

When Alfonso came to Miami for his interview, he met Bascom Palmer's founding director Edward W.D. Norton, M.D., and longtime colleague professor Victor Curtin, M.D., "They were amazing recruiters, and when I went back to the Northeast, I told Molly I wanted to come to Bascom Palmer," he said. "But I also told her that we would go back after my three-year residency." After completing his residency in 1984, Alfonso returned to Boston and completed fellowships in clinical and surgical corneal specialties at the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary; ophthalmic pathology at the David G. Cogan Eye Pathology Laboratory; and research at the Howe Laboratory, all affiliated with Harvard University.



Drs. Victor Curtin, Eduardo Alfonso, and Edward Norton, Bascom Palmer's founding chair

"Dr. Norton then invited Molly and me to join him for breakfast at the Ritz-Carlton in Boston on a snowy February morning. He asked if I would consider joining Bascom Palmer as a faculty member for a couple of years, and I said yes. We moved here in 1986, fell in love with the community, Bascom Palmer, and the University of Miami, and it has been my home for 40 years.

Initially hired as an assistant professor, Alfonso became a tenured professor and the Edward W.D. Norton Distinguished Chair in 1998. A specialist in corneal diseases and ocular microbiology, he garnered world-wide attention in 2004 when he played a key role in determining that a fungal infection outbreak was associated with a contact lens solution, leading the manufacturer to withdraw its product. Through the years, Alfonso has performed more than 1,000 corneal surgeries in adults and children, and developed the surgical and clinical applications of keratoprosthesis, an artificial cornea.

"It has been one of the great privileges of my career to have trained under Dr. Alfonso, beginning as his fellow in 1993," writes Carol L. Karp, M.D., the Richard K. Forster Chair in Ophthalmology, and the Dr. Ronald and Alicia Lepke Endowed Professor in Corneal and External Diseases. "He was a masterful surgeon – his corneal transplant sutures were as elegant as they were precise, a skill he joked about with the sign in his office that read, "If only my wife knew how well I can sew." As a young faculty member, I often sought his clinical, academic, and personal counsel and he gave it generously. An accomplished academician and gifted speaker, he unfailingly recognized the contribution of his mentees. He truly embodies the values of Dr. Edward Norton – integrity, excellence, and devotion to mentorship and faculty growth."



Dr. Eduardo and Molly Alfonso



Dr. Eduardo Alfonso (center) with Dr. John Clarkson, Bascom Palmer's second chair.

Global leadership

"Dr. Norton had a global vision and built collaborative ties with other clinicians and researchers around the world," Alfonso said. "In my first year on the faculty, he encouraged me to travel to Spain to present a research paper at a European ophthalmology conference. He also saw Bascom Palmer as a vital resource for helping patients from throughout the Caribbean and Latin America."

Today, the Institute's research portfolio represents more than $67 million in sponsored research funding dedicated to clinical and laboratory science programs, supported by federal and state grants alongside generous philanthropic donations. In addition, Bascom Palmer's medical education program trains ophthalmology residents, fellows, researchers, medical students, and clinical observers from throughout the United States and around the world.

"Dr. Alfonso's impact in ophthalmology has been remarkable. At Bascom Palmer, he has built an outstanding academic department that connects scientists and clinicians in areas such as immunology, infectious disease, computer science, regenerative medicine, and neuroscience. In the South Florida community he has helped develop screening and telehealth programs to expand access to eye care. And on a national level, he consistently provided thoughtful advice to guide strategic initiatives as a member of the National Eye Institute Council."

- **Michael F. Chiang, M.D.**,
Director, National Eye Institute,
National Institutes of Health

Alfonso has also fostered the Institute's growth in South Florida, serving as medical director of its ophthalmic clinical facilities, which include the University of Miami Hospital and Clinics, the Anne Bates Leach Eye Center, Jackson Memorial Hospital and Health System, the Veterans Administration Hospitals, and Bascom Palmer's outpatient facilities in Palm Beach Gardens, Plantation, Naples, Coral Gables, and North Miami.

This year, Bascom Palmer was again named the nation's #1 eye hospital by *U.S. News & World Report*, achieving the top position for the 24th time. The Institute repeatedly received the top eye hospital ranking and the top clinical care program ranking by *Ophthalmology Times*; and the ophthalmology residency program is continually recognized as the best in the country by Doximity. "Dr. Alfonso's brilliance is in maintaining Bascom Palmer's number one ranking all these years, said Donna Shalala, former United States Secretary of Health and Human Services and former president of the University of Miami. "To do so, he had to recruit the next generation of extraordinary physicians."

Overcoming challenges

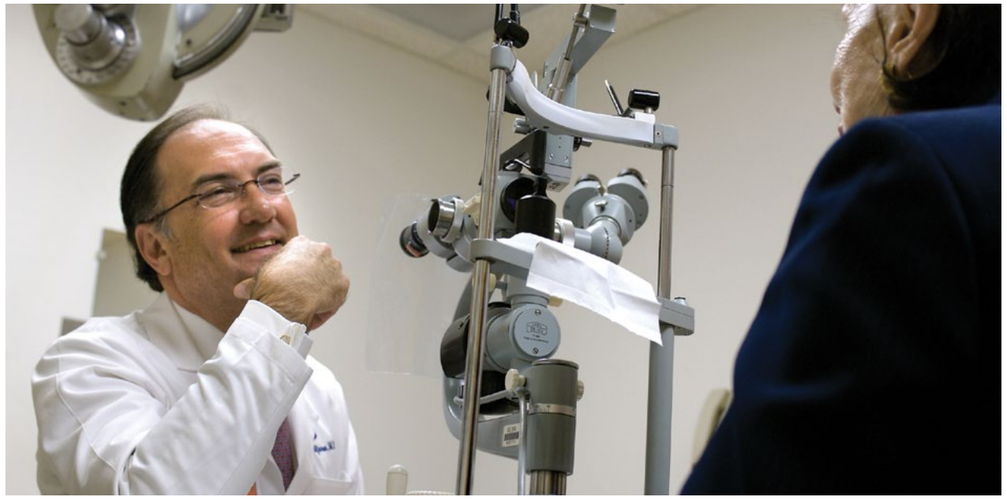
Bascom Palmer has also faced challenges throughout Alfonso's tenure. "Academic health centers have not been spared from strong financial headwinds on their clinical and research programs," Alfonso said. "The U.S. recession of 2009 had a serious impact on our funding. We must continually invest in our staffing, equipment, and services to accommodate South Florida's enormous population growth."

In 2020, Bascom Palmer, like healthcare institutions around the world, faced a crisis: how to deliver patient services safely during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Institute quickly implemented telehealth services to connect with patients and families at home, while instituting new emergency care precautions to protect patients, physicians, and staff members.

"Bascom Palmer has long been known for utilizing technology in providing clinical care," said Alfonso. "The pandemic accelerated our telemedicine, virtual care, and remote monitoring programs. It also spurred innovative thinking and research, which now encompasses artificial intelligence applications and cloud-based solutions that can deliver specialized vision care virtually anywhere in the world."



In 1989, a patient with a particularly difficult pterygium required a surgical procedure that involved surgeons from three different subspecialties. On the left is pediatric ophthalmologist, Dr. John Flynn. Behind him is oculoplastic specialist, Dr. Jan Kronish. Corneal specialist, Dr. Eduardo Alfonso, is on the right. A medical student observes from the background.



"In an era when leaders are defined by fist and fiat, Eddie's management style is based on humility, consensus, and transparency," said Richard K. Parrish II, Bascom Palmer's third chair. "I have never heard him address a public audience without first crediting the faculty and staff of the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute for the achievements. He has always focused on what 'we' have accomplished and not what 'he' has done."

Dr. Alfonso has intentionally cultivated an environment where faculty are encouraged to pursue meaningful opportunities that elevate both their careers and the Institution. Through a commitment to professional growth, he has created a culture in which advancement is not incidental but expected and supported. By providing vision and support, he fosters autonomy, accountability, and excellence – allowing faculty to thrive and deliver their highest impact.

– **Basil Wlliams, M.D.**,
Associate Professor of Clinical Ophthalmology

Looking ahead

Reflecting on his tenure as director, Alfonso looks to the future with confidence. "Bascom Palmer's first generation of faculty members did an outstanding job in establishing a positive, patient-centered culture," he said. "That has been the foundation for Bascom Palmer's growth, allowing us to attract world-class researchers, clinicians, and educators for more than 60 years."

Academic healthcare institutions like Bascom Palmer contribute to society in many ways, he added. "Our clinical and scientific research – along with commercial spinoffs from our faculty – hold the promise of powerful advancements in ophthalmology. "Bascom Palmer will continue to serve as a beacon of hope, transforming lives through excellent vision care for patients and families from all walks of life."

"Dr. Alfonso's leadership has been instrumental in sustaining Bascom Palmer's distinction as the country's top ophthalmology program while thoughtfully preparing it for the future," said Dipen J. Parekh, M.D., CEO, UHealth – University of Miami Health System and Executive Vice President for Health Affairs at the University of Miami. "He expanded its reach, fostered innovation, and nurtured a generation of clinicians and scientists who will carry the field forward. His legacy will continue to shape UHealth's Bascom Palmer Eye Institute for years to come."

"On behalf of all his admiring colleagues at Wills Eye Hospital, I extend our deepest gratitude and warmest congratulations to Eduardo Alfonso, M.D., as the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute celebrates his remarkable and historic tenure as director and chair of ophthalmology. Dr. Alfonso's extraordinary leadership, scholarship, and devotion to patient care have left an indelible mark on ophthalmology. Surgeon-scientist extraordinaire, his commitment to excellence in cornea, infectious disease, education, and mentorship has shaped generations of physicians and strengthened the bonds within our academic community. His charismatic, always-collegial, and positive influence extends far beyond Miami, touching colleagues and trainees across the country and around the world – including so many of us in Philadelphia.

While we celebrate a remarkable career, we also honor the legacy he leaves; a culture of rigor, compassion, and innovation that will continue to inspire. With admiration, respect, and warm wishes for a fulfilling next chapter, We thank you, Eddie! "

- **Julia A. Haller, M.D.,** Chief executive officer and ophthalmologist-in-chief, Wills Eye Hospital

A Stellar Career

"It is a true privilege to congratulate Dr. Alfonso as he steps back after almost two decades as ophthalmology chair at University of Miami and director of Bascom Palmer," says Paul Sternberg, Jr., M.D., professor and former director, Vanderbilt Eye Institute. "Eddie is the ultimate role model for the entire ophthalmology community, from trainee to chair. He is a spectacular clinician, an inspirational teacher and mentor, and an extraordinary visionary leader. With Dr. Alfonso at the helm, Bascom Palmer has continued to grow and thrive despite the turbulent and challenging forces we have all faced in academic medicine. He is beloved by all – medical students, residents, fellows, faculty, and colleagues across his university and around the world. He leaves a legacy of transformational greatness that we all admire."

As professor and director of Bascom Palmer Eye Institute, Alfonso received worldwide recognition for his stellar career. He has received numerous awards, including the American Academy of Ophthalmology's Honor Award, Senior Achievement Award, Life Achievement Honor Award, and Special Recognition Award. He was honored with the 2020 Claes Dohlman Award by the Cornea Society and Eye Bank Association of America; the Pan American Ophthalmological Foundation Ambassador for Education Award; and the Heed-Gutman Award from the Society of Heed Fellows.

South Florida Business Journal presented him with the CEO of the Year Award and named him one of the 100 most influential leaders in South Florida. He was honored with the Florida Society of Ophthalmology Leadership Award, and the Medical Faculty Award by ORBIS International. Alfonso was inducted into the American Ophthalmological Society, the University of Miami Iron Arrow Society, the Academia Ophthalmologica Internationale, Alpha Omega Alpha, Phi Beta Kappa, and the Order of St John.

Florida Trend has included him in their list of most influential leaders each year since 2018. He has been included in Best Doctors in America by Woodward/White since 1994, Top Doctors in the United States by Castle Connolly since 2000, and named to The Ophthalmologist Power List in 2014, 2016, 2018, 2022, and 2023, which names the world's 100 most influential people in ophthalmology.

Alfonso has served as director and president of the Miami Ophthalmological Society, Bascom Palmer Eye Institute Alumni Association, Sociedad Iberoamericana de Cornea y Cirugia Refractiva, Cuban Ophthalmological Society in Exile, Ophthalmology Research Foundation, Ocular Microbiology and Immunology Group, Association of University Professors of Ophthalmology, Heed Ophthalmic Foundation, and Pan American Association of Ophthalmology.

He has served or serves on the board of directors of the Society of Heed Fellows, Cornea Society, International Council of Ophthalmology, Ophthalmology Foundation, Florida Society of Ophthalmology, and the National Alliance for Eye and Vision Research.

Alfonso has also served on scientific boards for industry, National Eye Institute, Hope for Vision, Alcon Research Institute, and Research to Prevent Blindness. He was appointed by the Secretary of Health & Human Services to serve on the National Institute of Health's National Advisory Eye Council, a prestigious panel of leading scientists that advises the National Eye Institute.

Dr. Alfonso has elevated the standard of ophthalmology nationally and internationally through his commitment to innovation, education, and exceptional patient care. His legacy is reflected not only in groundbreaking achievements but also in the countless lives touched through his service and mentorship. He has been an extraordinary role model for me and for many others who have had the privilege of working with him.

– **Steven J. Gedde, M.D.,**
John G. Clarkson Chair in Ophthalmology



"Dr. Alfonso has done a spectacular job in his leadership role at Bascom Palmer," says M. Anthony Burns, former president and CEO of Ryder Systems, and life trustee at the University of Miami. "His business knowledge and understanding, his assessment of the environment, and his ability to position Bascom Palmer for success have been impeccable. Most importantly, his honesty and integrity to do the right thing is unmatched." ■

Dr. Alfonso's Enduring Impact

- Bascom Palmer ranked best in the nation in ophthalmology by *U.S News & World Report* every year throughout his leadership.
- Consistently receiving the #1 ranking of ophthalmology residency programs in the United States by Doximity and *Ophthalmology Times.*
- Promoting high-impact research in every field of ophthalmology, including artificial intelligence, gene therapy, and imaging technology.
- Investing in scientific and clinical research into preventative therapies, regenerative treatments, and biotechnology.
- Remodeling the Anne Bates Leach Eye Center and providing additional research space in the McKnight Vision Research Center.
- Opening the permanent home for Bascom Palmer Eye Institute Naples and the Lois Pope Center for Retinal & Macular Degeneration Research at Bascom Palmer Palm Beach Gardens.
- Launching Bascom Palmer at the Lennar Foundation Medical Center in Coral Gables; and Bascom Palmer at SoLé Mia in North Miami.
- Opening Bascom Palmer UAE Abu Dhabi, serving the Middle East.
- Delivering effective vision care during the COVID-19 pandemic, including implementing telehealth services.
- Implementing sight-saving vision screening programs throughout South Florida communities.
- Strengthening clinical, educational and research outreach programs to Haiti, South America, Africa, and Asia.
- Opening the Global Center for Ophthalmic Education, bringing together all aspects of ophthalmic education.
- Creating the Master of Science in Vision Science and Investigative Ophthalmology (MVSIO) graduate degree program.
- Launching new video learning programs such as virtual Grand Rounds for physicians, residents, and medical students from throughout the U.S. and beyond.
- Growing Bascom Palmer's endowment by 100%.
- Establishing 20 endowed chairs.
- Creating luminary programs: the Dr. Nasser Ibrahim Al-Rashid Vision Research Center and the Mark J. Daily Inherited Retinal Diseases Research Center.