It was in the early summer of 2019 that I graduated from college and excitedly applied to medical school. If all went according to plan, I would begin my MD program in August of 2020, giving me an entire year off from school. My primary focus for this gap year was simple: relax, kick back, and relax some more. In addition to all this R&R, I knew I would need to find a job. Securing employment, however, was several rungs down on my ladder of priorities. I would’ve never expected that the job I would soon be hired for would become one of the most formative experiences of my life.

On an afternoon perusing job search websites, I happened upon a listing for an “Eye Bank Recovery Technician” with the Utah Lions Eye Bank and decided to send in an application. A few emails, phone calls, and interviews later I found myself on my first official day of training. I shadowed a seasoned Recovery Technician on a case that took us to the Medical Examiner’s Office, and I remember watching in total awe as my trainer performed the corneal excision with expert precision and care. It was an impressive procedure. After the shift had ended, I found myself thinking about the day over and over again. For most people, the concept of death is a difficult one to grapple with; I was no exception to this rule. To me, the idea was uncomfortable and made me sad. I began to ask myself, am I cut out for this kind of work? Can I handle this kind of proximity to death?

Despite my reservations, I continued on. In the weeks that followed, I trained on many, many more cases and began to gain a more in-depth understanding of both the surgical procedure and the cornea donation process. The most memorable moments were the ones in which I had the pleasure of meeting and speaking with donor families. The nature of the situation gave me the opportunity to connect with and provide comfort to individuals in some of their most vulnerable moments.

As my experiences grew, my perspective began to shift. No longer was I working with the discomfort of death. Rather, I had the opportunity to celebrate one’s life and facilitate the giving of an invaluable donation: the gift of sight. I started to view my job as a special privilege and responsibility.

I now welcome each case (even the ones that wake me in the middle of the night) fueled by the compassion and generosity of both the donor and their family. It has become of the utmost importance to me to treat each...
Monika Fleckenstein, MD has joined Moran’s SCTM team to help bring the first age-related macular degeneration (AMD) treatment based on a patient’s genetic makeup to clinical trials.

**Physician-Scientist**

Monika Fleckenstein, MD

Joins Moran Eye Center’s Dream Team

Monika Fleckenstein, MD, a longtime collaborator with the John A. Moran Eye Center’s Sharon Eccles Steele Center for Translational Medicine (SCTM), has joined Moran’s team as a full-time Professor.

Fleckenstein is one of several experts recently recruited to help the SCTM bring the first age-related macular degeneration (AMD) treatment based on a patient’s genetic makeup to clinical trials. AMD is the leading cause of central vision loss among adults age 55 and older. There is no cure or treatment that effectively halts the progress of AMD to late-stage disease.

Fleckenstein will oversee the SCTM’s DREAM1 study. The study is a major effort to determine how and when to administer a new therapy developed to treat patients with AMD caused by genes on chromosome 1. Chromosome-1 AMD is the most prevalent of two gene-driven forms of the disease identified by SCTM scientists. The SCTM continues to make progress on a treatment for the second form of AMD, linked to chromosome 10.

Eye Donors Make it Possible

Since no other organism has AMD, SCTM researchers work with donated human eye tissue and study subjects.

Reaching the clinical trial stage, which will test the new therapy in patients for safety and efficacy, has required the support of thousands of tissue donors who have left their eyes to science. More than 4,800 AMD patients are also enrolled in an SCTM genetics study.

Generous financial donors and private industry partners continue to move research forward.

“Our dream for the future is ultimately to treat AMD patients based solely on their genetics,” said Gregory S. Hageman, PhD, executive director of the SCTM.

“Being involved in this work is the chance of a lifetime. Greg is a pioneer in AMD research, and it’s a logical consequence that all of his research work from the past 30 years now ends in an interventional trial.”

—Monika Fleckenstein, MD

Like Hageman, Fleckenstein believes treatment at an early disease stage is critical.

“We all fear that there is this point of no return where you simply cannot save the retina,” said Fleckenstein. “If you have a clinical trial that lasts for 12 months, and the retina is already predetermined to die, treatment is not going to work. The timing of the therapy and the measures you choose to evaluate success need to fit together.”

A Renowned Authority on Clinical Trials

Fleckenstein received her medical degree from the University of Heidelberg School of Medicine in Germany and completed a research fellowship in inherited retinal diseases at Johns Hopkins University.

The former head of the University of Bonn Department of Ophthalmology Clinical Trial Center in Germany, she is recognized as an international authority on the design, conduct, and analysis of clinical trials in retinal diseases.

Fleckenstein, who specializes in degenerative retinal diseases, including AMD, also sees patients at Moran’s University of Utah location.

An Unexpected Role  | continued from previous page

person I work on with sensitivity and respect, keeping in mind their loved ones and the immeasurable value of their life.

Now, as precautionary measures against the COVID-19 pandemic have halted all non-essential surgeries, myself and the rest of the staff here at the Utah Lions Eye Bank have found ourselves at a bit of a standstill as our volume of cases has slowed to a trickle. For our recipients, this means an indefinite wait time for a procedure that could be life-changing. This unfortunate period has given me a chance to reflect on the important role my job as a Recovery Technician plays in my life and the lives of others. I look forward to beating this pandemic and getting back to work as soon as it is safe.

What began as a simple gap year job has grown into an experience that has permanently impacted how I think about death and organ donation. The perspectives I’ve gained in my time with the Utah Lions Eye Bank have helped inform my path to medicine and better prepare me to become a more compassionate, experienced doctor in my future career. I will always be thankful for the lessons I have learned and the experiences I have had as a Utah Lions Eye Bank Recovery Technician.
Heart of the Lion Courier Program

Please join us in thanking the following Utah Lions for their support of the Heart of the Lion Courier Program by delivering precious eye tissue to local hospitals and surgery centers, October 2019–March 2020. Due to COVID-19 we temporarily suspended the courier program as a precaution for the health of our Lion volunteers.

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<tr>
<th>Courier</th>
<th>Total Deliveries</th>
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<tr>
<td>Albert Woodmansee</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bill &amp; Karen Barton</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cathy Johnson</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elmer Inman</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jay &amp; Rosa Meservy</td>
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<td>Joe Bingle</td>
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<td>Joe Thompson</td>
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<td>Mike Eisenberg</td>
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<td>RaNae Bryant</td>
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<td>Skyler Rohbock</td>
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<td><strong>Grand Total</strong></td>
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Bereavement Support Groups

For bereavement support group information, please contact the University of Utah College of Nursing

**801.585.9522**

healthcare.utah.edu/caring-connections

The Celebration of Life Monument Ceremony will be held virtually this year on August 29th

For Our Donor Families,

An invitation with more details and instructions on how to watch the event will be emailed and mailed to the contact information you provided on your loved one’s name submission form.

For Our Recipients,

We are looking for cornea recipients to share their story by recording a brief 10–30 second video. If interested in sharing your transplant story, please reach out to uleb.familyservices@hsc.utah.edu or call 801.213.2147 for instructions.

“When you learn, teach. When you get, give.” — Maya Angelou
Financial Gifts for Sight

The Utah Lions Eye Bank thanks the following individuals for their generous financial donations September 2019–April 2020:

- Aleene Alder
- Barbara & Thurman Locke
- Barbara Anderson
- Bentley Isom
- Bessie Marie Peterson
- Constance Baker
- Dave & Londa Stout
- David C. Lee
- Deane Van Wagenen
- DeeAnn Gornichec
- Don Shearer
- Edward & Rob Hughes
- Ekhlas Attia
- Elwin Dutson
- Ercell & Roberta Blain
- Fern Bartholomew
- Gary & Garda Wardel
- Gerald Millard
- Geraldine & Paul Kilpatrick
- Helga Hardin
- J. Max Anderson
- Jack & Carol Oldroyd
- Janet Luke
- Jerry Millard
- John Bendixen
- John D. Carnahan
- Joseph V. Cook, MD
- Joyce & Don Polster
- Judith & Phillip Yeates
- Kathleen Issac
- Ken & Ruth Caye
- Kurt Matzen
- Mardy Goehringer
- Marynell Snow
- Michael K. Damron
- Michelle France
- Milton Anderson
- Nancy & Joseph Cook
- Paul B. Crookston
- Paul W. Brooks
- Penny & Rodney Southwick
- Philip M. McLaughlin
- R. Burke Teichert
- Richard & Sharon Bretzing
- Rob & Bev Grant
- Robert F. Smith
- Samuel T. Hunter
- Sandra Delaney
- Sandra Diamanti
- Sheila B. Van Wagoner
- Sherman Rigby
- Sherry Luthi
- Stephen & Leslie Goddard
- Stephen & Nancy Williams
- Stephen Francis
- Sylvia C. Newton
- Tom White
- Utah Lions Foundation
- Willard & Rona Maughan
- Zoila Avelina Sanchez

Memorial Gifts

- Arla Zabolotney in memory of Paul Zabolotney
- Beverly Woodward in memory of Jaimie Lynn
- Carol Loftin to honor the occasion of receiving a transplant
- Gary & Garda Wardle to honor the occasion of Christmas
- Janaye & Dale Berggren in memory of Maurine Jessop
- Kathleen Gubler in honor of Bryne & Kelton Gubler
- Linda Campbell in memory of Kent M. Campbell, in honor of Ryan Campbell, and to honor the occasion of her son being the recipient of two corneas
- Robert Hartleben to say thank you
- Samuel & Sharon Nichols in memory of Steven Nichols
- Sheri Bodily in memory of Colleen H. Bowman, in honor of Rourke H. Bowman, and to honor whoever gave to help me have the gift of sight
- Sherwin & Judith Kirtleson to honor the occasion of receiving two cornea transplants
- South Salt Lake Lions Club in memory of Gayland Mason

Please use the enclosed envelope, or visit us online at www.utaheyebank.org, to give by credit card to make a donation in memory of, or in honor of, someone you love. Thank you for your generosity.

“We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.”
—Winston Churchill