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[center for retina and macular disease]

Vision Realized: Dr. Misch's Practice Now Includes Eight Locations

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SPECIAL TO THE LEDGER

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WINTER HAVEN | Business people usually say specific goals, in numbers and time terms, need to be set in order to succeed.

Dr. David Misch took a different approach - quality over quantity - and much success has followed, although he hesitates to call it that.

Misch founded the Center for Retina and Macular Disease in Winter Haven in 1991. He wasn't thinking at the time in terms of expanding to eight Central Florida locations today: Lakeland, Haines City, Zephyrhills, Clermont, Sebring and smaller, satellite offices in Plant City and Avon Park.

His partner, Dr. Michael Tolentino, has been in the forefront of research for new drugs and treatments and the Center has led the Southeast in clinical trials for retina disease for the last 2 1/2 years, with more than 30.

Misch, 51, of Lakeland, is a native of Cedarburg, Wis., north of Milwaukee. He received a doctorate at the University of Wisconsin in 1983, graduating in the top 5 percent of his class, and did a residency at the famed Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn.

He said he was leery of being interviewed as an entrepreneur or even calling himself an unqualified success. "Road toward success" is the term he prefers.

"In my experience, most people feel that it is mutually exclusive to be both an excellent physician and a successful businessman," Misch said. "I have an MBA, but I rarely let people know about it because I would rather be considered an excellent physician than a successful businessman."

THREE CORNERSTONES

Misch thinks the secret to the company's growth, or road toward success, is threefold:

Service. "I feel that the cornerstone of our success is our dedication to providing superior service to our patients and their referring physicians," Misch said. "To date, our office has never turned a patient away for inability to pay for our services. Our primary goal is to treat the patient first and then take care of the financial matters afterward. We are in the business of providing excellent patient care, first and foremost."

Innovation. In addition to the research and trials done by Tolentino, Misch says the practice has developed many new methods. It has used an electronic medical record, standard today, well before many practices did so. It was one of the first retina practices to invest in digital imaging and has been using digital cameras since 1995.

Then there is the research. "Our clinical research department allows us to develop new treatments for macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy, retinal vascular occlusions and other retinal diseases," Misch said. "We are looking ahead and have hired a new physician, Karen Gehrs, who has 15 years experience as a professor of retinal diseases at the University of Iowa and has a strong background in genetic research of retinal diseases, especially as to how various gene defects determine the risk and type of macular degeneration."

Quality of physicians. Dr. Adam Berger was a professor of retinal surgery at Washington University in St. Louis before joining the Polk center. Tolentino was a professor of retinal surgery at the University of Pennsylvania and is a Harvard Medical School graduate. Dr. Jin Moon did his undergraduate and medical school training at Duke University and was considered one of the best retina fellows in the country. Dr. Rich Hamilton did his undergraduate and medical school at Harvard and went on to begin training as a general surgeon before entering ophthalmology. And Gehrs will be coming onboard.

"We're a clinical research site for retinal disease," said Tolentino, 42, of Lakeland. "It's been starting the last five years for



MICHAEL WILSON | THE LEDGER
DR. MICHAEL TOLENTINO, left, and Dr. David Misch are partners in the Center for Retina and Macular Disease. Below, the Optos Wide Field digital imaging system the center uses on its patients.

previously unmet medical needs. There are these new drugs coming out to reverse and restore vision in patients that would normally be blind.

"It's a new field. I helped develop the first generation of these drugs and now we're trying to develop the next generation."

LOCATION, LOCATION

Why Polk County? The word "demographics" comes up again and again in discussing location - that and the climate.

"First of all, some of my training was in the South," Misch said. "I had a Lions (Club) fellowship in New Orleans. I did another fellowship in Milwaukee. About halfway through the winter I realized there's a life beyond snowfall and it's about a thousand miles south."

Misch worked for two years at a practice in Jacksonville before deciding he wanted to start his own practice. He was attracted by Polk's demographics. For example, he said, Tampa and Orlando had retina specialists, but there were none in between.

Misch was also drawn by Polk's population base. Within a 100-mile radius of Lakeland reside 8.6 million people, more than any city in the Southeast. Also, eye diseases are largely found in seniors and Polk is second only to Manatee County in having the largest percentage of people 65 and older, Misch said.

He sees 125 to 150 patients a week in Winter Haven, Sebring and Zephyrhills, according to Michael Barnes, administrator for the retina center. The same physicians work mainly at the same places for consistency and familiarity with patients.

At least 57,000 patients are in the company's database, which has existed for about 10 years. There were others previously, some still on the rolls, so it's hard to say exactly how many have been treated in the 18-year practice, but the number exceeds 60,000.

"We've been affected by the economy," Barnes said. "That's partly because of fewer referrals from other physicians. Some people have gone into basic survival mode, so the numbers have slacked. We had a decrease in winter visitors this year. It wasn't the 'boom' we usually get. It's not just this region. It's across the board, affecting everybody one way or another."

As if the challenges of his career aren't enough, in his spare time, Misch has built a helicopter and now is building a sports car.

The helicopter was a hobby, never used for business. "You don't want to have your schedule dictate flying because you can get in too much of a hurry," he said. He co-owned the chopper with a friend and eventually they sold it on eBay when Misch was ready to move on to a new project.

Now he's building a GTM supercar. "It's a kit car, a Factory Five. It has a Corvette engine, suspension and parts and Porsche transaxle. It will be kind of a cross between a Corvette and a Ferrari," he said.

PATIENTS REWARDING

Most rewarding, Misch said, is when patients report significant improvement in vision.

"When they say they're glad they came here to our facility, and tell us we're the best physicians they've ever been to because we're conscientious," he said.

One of the firm's patients is Homer Hooks, 88, of Lakeland, well-known here for a variety of reasons. Hooks, once a journalist covering the citrus beat for the Tampa Tribune, moved to Lakeland, became executive director of the Florida Department of Citrus and was president of the Florida Phosphate Council for 20 years. He's also active in the arts and politics locally. He's a longtime adviser and fundraiser for the Democratic Party.

He also has macular degeneration.

"Dr. Tolentino has effectively stabilized my condition," Hooks said. "He tests my eyes on about a quarterly basis. I voluntarily surrendered my driver's license. That's a landmark decision in anyone's life. More recently, I've lived a normal life, have a driver, can read normally with magnification, watch TV, have no pain."

Thomas Giordano, another macular degeneration patient at the center, has homes in Orlando and Amityville, N.Y., on Long Island.

"I had macular degeneration and I never knew it," he said. "I was legally blind. Dr. Tolentino did a study and developed a vaccine seven years ago that has helped so many people, and sold it to the company that makes it now. He really wants to help people. I felt he was so qualified.

"With my injections (directly in the eye, only his left eye), now I can see numbers and daylight. I can't say enough for Dr. Tolentino. He's high in his field. It's amazing what they do in that building. Dr. Tolentino is working on a drug to cut the time needed to get the job done.

"I've never felt better. I just can't believe it, how much better I can see."

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