Introducing Sheila K. West, the Recipient of the 2019 Weisenfeld Award

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It is an honor and privilege to introduce my good friend and close colleague, Dr. Sheila West, as the 2019 Weisenfeld honoree. Dr. West is a living example of Pasteur’s famous aphorism, “chance favors the prepared mind.”

Dr. West received her first doctoral degree in Pharmacy from the University of California, San Francisco. She followed that with a PhD in Epidemiology from Johns Hopkins, where she served as Program Director of Pharmaceutical Studies. That work was soon interrupted by a move to the Philippines. Four years later, upon returning to the United States, I had the good fortune of convincing her to join us at the new Dana Center for Preventive Ophthalmology, a joint endeavor of the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health and the Wilmer Eye Institute, focusing upon the causes and prevention of major ocular diseases. She has been a distinguished and powerful intellectual force at the Dana Center and Wilmer ever since.

Sheila was thrown into the ferment of our Center’s multiple interests, having to discover which ophthalmic epidemiologic questions were worth pursuing. Discovering appropriate questions, and suitable study populations, did not take her long. She not only found answers to the questions she sought, but also, as often happens in thoughtful research, discovered answers to questions she had not even conceived. More importantly, she kept interest in her discoveries until she had collected sufficient data to change the way the field thought about those relationships, and in many instances, changed global policy!

To provide just a few examples: Sheila was the first to report the association between smoking and the development of nuclear cataract, an association that eventually made its way into the Surgeon General’s report—in the chapter that she was asked to author.

The longitudinal Salisbury Eye Study, which she initiated, was an intensive investigation of a racially diverse population on the Delmarva Peninsula. It has yielded a trove of insights, including differences in the prevalence of cataract and age-related macular degeneration between whites and African Americans. These discoveries led her to abiding interest in racial disparities in health, in general; and to building a major research team and portfolio around the impact that eye conditions have on patients’ quality of life.

She and her colleagues were also the first to report risk factors for diabetic retinopathy among Mexican Americans, and to identify glaucoma as a leading cause of blindness in this same population.

Globally, Sheila is probably best known for her pioneering work on the prevention and control of trachoma. One of her most enduring contributions was her demonstration that simple face washing could dramatically reduce trachoma incidence and prevalence, and reduce the infectious burden within the community. This was followed by studies carefully evaluating the success of trichiasis surgical techniques and their outcomes. Both have been powerful forces behind the development and implementation of the World Health Organization’s SAFE strategy (surgery, antibiotics, face-washing, environmental sanitation), a program that is making enormous progress in eradicating the world’s commonest infectious cause of blindness, and on whose advisory committees she has served for over three decades.

Sheila’s earliest work on trachoma began in a desolate, remote area of Tanzania, but even that distant location did not prevent her from encouraging her daughter Allison (Figure), and countless medical students and fellows, from following in her path.

Impactful research has been only one aspect of Sheila’s highly successful scientific career. By way of example: she has served on numerous National Eye Institute committees, and chaired the 2007 National Eye Institute Ocular Epidemiology Strategic Program Planning Panel; she has been a long-time, prominent member of the Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology (ARVO), having served as a trustee, as Chair of the Program Planning Committee, and as our first female President. She was editor-in-chief of the journal Ophthalmic Epidemiology and has been a member of the Board of the Alcon Research Institute, and the jury of the Helen Keller Prize.

![Figure: Sitting with her daughter Alison, Dr. West takes a break from her work with the population of rural Kongwa, Tanzania, in 1989. At the time the region suffered from intense, widespread trachoma.](https://example.com/image-url)
More mundanely, for someone so accomplished, she’s had continuous research funding for over 40 years, and published over 400 peer-reviewed articles.

While epidemiologists rarely achieve general scientific leadership at their home institutions, Sheila has been the Vice-Chair for Research at Wilmer for over two decades. And rightfully so: she combines a keen scientific mind with unbridled enthusiasm for all things research; and inspires junior faculty to share her passion. Above all, Sheila is a wonderful human being! She cares deeply about her students and collaborators, is always open to new ideas, and is a joy to work with.

Mildred Weisenfeld, who founded Fight for Sight in 1946, felt that her greatest impact on the field of ophthalmology was to encourage research and researchers. Sheila has fulfilled Mildred’s aspirations in spades! The Weisenfeld Award is generally meant for a “clinician scientist”; this has usually been interpreted to be a card-carrying ophthalmologist. Fittingly, Sheila West is the first female, nonclinician PhD to receive the coveted Weisenfeld Award!

Acknowledgments

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