



Pooja Sharma, M.D.'08: Vision for the Future

If the human eye is like a camera, capturing and interpreting images, then Pooja Sharma, M.D., a third-year resident at the College of Medicine, works to ensure that that camera remains as functional and healthy as possible. An ophthalmologist specializing in oculoplastics, Dr. Sharma's particular field neatly merges her strong desire to help others with an interest in research and technology. Working at the cutting edge of vision technology, a more personal life vision also emerged for Sharma. Besides advancing her professional career, the College is also where she met her husband, Abhijith Dev Mally, M.D., while they were both enrolled in medical school.

Sharma, a native of Easton, Pennsylvania, attended Duke University, majoring in biology and women's studies. One of her more meaningful experiences at Duke was the time spent volunteering at a local crisis center. "While on call, I would either be counseling over the telephone or face-to-face in the ER," she explains. "I really just liked being able to be there for someone and help them out. It motivated me to pursue a service-oriented profession."



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After her first year at the Drexel University College of Medicine, Sharma participated in a two-month, NIH-sponsored summer program at the National Eye Institute in Maryland. While there, she was exposed to a range of ideas and philosophies and became fascinated with the field of ophthalmology. In this specialty, "There really is the potential to help people and make a dramatic difference in their lives. Additionally, I really enjoy being in the operating room, so ophthalmology is the perfect mix of OR and clinic work. It's also a very exciting field to be in right now, because there are so many new technologies and developments happening."

Sharma's desire to help people in a tangible way and her intellectual interest in research and medical innovation, have merged well in the specialty of oculoplastics. In this discipline, the focus is on the eyelid drainage system, the bony socket, and the supporting structures around the eye. Surgeries are frequently performed to remediate droopy eyelids, but they also occur in cases of facial reconstruction and cancer removal. Sharma credits Myron Yanoff, M.D., chair of the Ophthalmology Department, for his inspiration as a teacher and surgeon. "I'm really lucky to be training with him," she says. "All of the ophthalmology attendings are very committed to resident education."

Sharma also serves as the chief resident for the Ophthalmology Program. "It's a position of



Myron Yanoff, M.D.

authority she's handled diplomatically," Dr. Yanoff relates. Ophthalmology residents at the College are also encouraged to engage in research and attend national conferences. Participating in these large conferences, Sharma says, is ensured mainly through generous department funding. She presented at this year's Discovery Day at Drexel and at several conferences throughout the year, including a National Oculoplastics Meeting in October.



At this national meeting, Sharma presented during the cosmetics portion on "the mechanisms of facial aging." To study this phenomenon, physicians primarily compare pictures, yet at times they will also dissect cadavers. Sharma says they are "looking at the factors which lead to facial aging. Though we have

multiple ways to correct facial aging, such as face-lifts and fillers, the anatomic basis is still unclear. It's really a multi-factorial phenomenon; but the two most popular causes are considered to be gravity and volume loss."

Sharma's experience as a resident and medical student has prepared her well for a career in oculoplastics. "The faculty is incredible, and they're all so dedicated to teaching," she observes. Sharma knew of Drexel's strong reputation from medical students who would rotate with her father, a preceptor at Easton Hospital. She also relates that the existence of the Program for Integrated Learning (PIL) track signaled Drexel's commitment to attract and engage a different type of medical student. While she pursued the traditional Interdisciplinary Foundations of Medicine (IFM) course, PIL nevertheless influenced her decision to attend Drexel. The College "seemed like a good place to be. They are really trying to make it an ideal place for every type of student."

One of these fellow students happened to be Sharma's future husband, Abhijith Dev Mally. Drs. Mally and Sharma were married this fall in Philadelphia in a traditional Indian wedding ceremony. As Yanoff is quick to mention, this tradition included the groom riding down Broad Street on a white horse. Sharma relates that planning the wedding, while fun, "was a lot of extra work outside of the residency." In addition to out-of-town and international guests, many of their classmates and colleagues were able to be present. Sharma says the fact that her attendings were there to celebrate is a testament to the strength of community the school helps forge.

Sharma and Mally are currently living many miles apart as he completes his urology residency in Pittsburgh. While the distance is currently a challenge, Sharma is excited to join him once she begins an oculoplastics fellowship at Allegheny General Hospital. "Oculoplastics is the most competitive fellowship in all ophthalmology," explains Yanoff, "but [Sharma] got one, which tells you something about her credentials." Summing up the residency and long-distance experience, Sharma says, "It's stressful, but we've made it this far already."

Many residents can relate to that sentiment, whether married or not.

At the end of this intense period, though, Sharma will have a wealth of surgical knowledge and experience to further aid her calling to restore vision.

