Optometric Vision Therapy/Rehabilitation Service at the SUNY College Of Optometry

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History
The Optometric Vision Therapy/Rehabilitation Service of the SUNY State College of Optometry is the only free standing service of its kind in the country. The early development of this service is tied to the roots of the college. SUNY State College of Optometry was founded in 1971 by legislative act. The clinical arm of the college came from the Optometric Center of New York which was established in 1956 after the closing of the Optometry School at Columbia. A significant part of the Optometric Center was its vision therapy clinic. This clinic treated patients of all ages with visual skill dysfunctions, amblyopia and strabismus. The staff included many individuals that contributed to the future growth and acceptance of optometric vision therapy. These individuals included Drs. Fred Brock, Daniel Woolf, William Ludlam, Nathan Flax, Martin Birnbaum, Elliott Forrest, Irwin Suchoff, Israel Greenwald and Arnold Sherman. In the 1960’s the center began to attract children with severe learning disabilities [referred to as brain injured at that time] as well as the mentally handicapped and those with attention issues [referred to as the Emotionally Disturbed at that time]. To care for these children the Center established The Developmental Clinic as part of the Vision Therapy Clinic. This clinic was begun by Myron Wienstein and Stanley Evans, closely followed by Ira Bernstein, Harold Friedman, Irwin Suchoff and Leon Hoffman. The now well known SUNY Developmental Battery was written by these optometrists. When the college began, most of the names mentioned above came on the staff of the vision therapy service as full or part time professors. Dr. Flax was the first Chief of the service. In the early years of the college there was no pediatric service so the Infant Vision and Children with Special Needs Clinics were part of the Vision Therapy Service. There has always been a separate Strabismus/Amblyopia clinic within the service because of scheduling and staff issues. Until recently the unit has been headed by Dr. Greenwald.

The SUNY approach to vision therapy and rehabilitation may be hard to define or classify. Classical optometric thinking, diagnostic examination and therapy cannot be ignored. The human visual system is wired the same way for most of us and certain anatomical/physiological relationships exist. However, the functional aspects of the system must also be taken into consideration. These functional aspects are not just the data generated during an evaluation but are critical for visual information processing and related

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to other information processing systems. Structure is not independent of function. SUNY staff tries to impart to their students the rationale for binocular testing in primary care and how to relate these findings to a case history that goes beyond the primary presenting problem. SUNY graduates are capable of diagnosing and treating visual skill dysfunctions and recognizing problems that may be related to learning and occupational needs.

The Vision Therapy Residencies

In 1974 two events occurred which not only shaped the future of the optometric vision therapy service but I believe, optometry in general. The first was the establishment of the first optometric residency in the country. The Vision Therapy Rehabilitation residency accepted four students for the program and has continued to do so to the present. Applicants have come from just about every optometry school in the country. From 1974 to 2006, 125 doctors have successfully completed the program. The Mission Statement of the residency is noted below:

MISSION: The residency in vision therapy seeks to attract the best qualified, entry level optometric graduates and provide them with advanced didactic knowledge and a concentrated clinical experience in optometric vision therapy. Individuals who complete the program are expected to deliver a high level of clinical care and vision therapy, serve as teachers in optometric institutions, and serve the profession of optometry as expert leaders in the areas of vision therapy and binocular vision.

These doctors have been or are on the staff of many of the colleges of optometry. They have developed some of the most prestigious private practices in the country specializing in vision therapy. They are members of COVD and have served on many committees. Today's residents are exposed to all of the clinics in the service. There are mini courses given by Drs. Greenwald, Cooper, Sherman, Kapoor and Friedman discussing all of the special populations that benefit from vision therapy. Because a significant number of the staff is in private practice there are always discussions relative to practice management. The residents spend a whole day in two full scope private practices specializing in vision therapy. All SUNY residents must attend a Friday Program which includes grand rounds and other presentations. The major presentations are presented over two days at which the whole professional staff and outside optometrists are invited. COPE credits are provided. The residents have approximately 850 clinical encounters a year at the college. They are required to spend time in Primary Care, Pediatrics, Ocular Disease, and Low Vision. They are required to write a minor and major paper. Many of these papers have been published in the COVD journal as well as other publications.

The Learning Disability Unit

The second clinical area that was established was the Learning Disabilities Unit. The college was able to convince SUNY to agree to put psychologists on the staff. This unit is an interdisciplinary program designed to provide diagnostic and therapeutic services to children and adults with learning and attention disabilities in order to improve their cognitive and educational function. The psychologists provided the necessary neuro-psycho-educational assessments to help ensure a successful vision therapy outcome and to give families and schools appropriate educational recommendations and diagnoses. The psychological evaluation is extensive and involves 6 to 8 hours of testing not including intake and report sessions. The first chief psychologist was Florence Springer and the Optometric Director was Dr. Harold Solan, followed by Drs. Sidney Groffman and Rochelle Mozlin, and presently Harold Friedman. The contributions of these optometrists are legendary. Dr. Solan continues to conduct research at SUNY. Dr. Groffman is recently retired, but still writes for Optometry & Vision Development.

Today this unit receives referrals from public and private schools and professionals in the field, not only in the New York area, but from all over the country. Patients cannot be referred for a psycho-educational evaluation only. They must go through a primary care, visual skills, and perceptual evaluation as well. Every report is a combined optometric and psychological evaluation. Our students, externs, and residents are
required to contribute to every optometric report. The recommendations usually include an optometric vision therapy program which means that our students are exposed to patients that may have learning disabilities and/or attention issues.

**The Head Trauma Unit**

In 1994, Drs. Irwin Suchoff and Marie Marrone established the Head Trauma Visual Rehabilitation Unit as part of the Vision Therapy Service. The unit services acquired head trauma and stroke patients. The most common visually related symptoms are diplopia, visual field loss, and balance issues; loss of concentration, light sensitivity, headaches, and eye pain. The unit is headed by Drs. Neera Kapoor with Ken Ciufredda as consultant and is now known as the Raymond Greenwold Vision Rehabilitation Institute in appreciation for a donation from a satisfied patient. Patients are referred from hospitals throughout the greater New York metropolitan area and from private practitioners of all disciplines. After an extensive case history, a complete neuro-optometric evaluation is provided. The recommendations are incorporated into the total rehabilitation plan for the patient and reports are sent to the responsible multi-discipline practitioners. Vision therapy is carried out at SUNY by staff doctors supported by residents and externs. Dr. Kapoor has become internationally known in the field and with Dr. Ciufredda has been the recipient of two major grants. “Oculomotor Rehabilitation to Improve Reading in Patients with Acquired Brain Injury and “Improving Walking Ability in Stroke Patients Using Optical Rehabilitation. Both are funded by the Langeloth foundation. In 2005, the unit was able to provide a separate Head Trauma residency program.

SUNY Visual Therapy/Rehabilitation Service staffs the vision clinic at the International Center for the Disabled. The professional staff and head trauma resident provide primary care and vision rehabilitation for a selected acquired head trauma population.

**Bio-Feedback Unit**

In 1988, Drs. Tannen and Ciufredda established a biofeedback unit within the service. Thanks to Dr. Ciufredda we have the most advanced equipment currently available. The unit works with patients who exhibit nystagmus and difficult strabismus cases. The two doctors supervise residents and externs in the evaluations and therapy.

**Grant**

In 2003, the Vision Therapy Service received a total of $650,000 in grant money, primarily from the Lavelle Fund. The monies were used to pay for perceptual evaluations, educational evaluations, and perceptual vision therapy. These procedures have no medical code and when managed care replaced state Medicaid, the service had to charge families for these services. Unfortunately, families on Medicaid could not afford the services. To this date we have provided full vision care and psycho-educational evaluations for over 500 children with learning disabilities who would not normally have received these services. We were also allowed to use the monies to establish an elaborate database which can relate any optometric procedure to any neuro psycho-educational test.

**The Curriculum**

During July 2000 we relocated to midtown New York City within our own 18-story building on 42nd Street between Times Square and Grand Central Station. The Vision Therapy Service is located on the 5th floor and has 26 full and part time staff. We have 9 fully equipped vision therapy suites not including a special suite for Head Trauma patients. During the fiscal year 7/06-7/07 the service counted over 13,000 in house visits. Almost all of the evaluations are performed by students, externs, and residents with staff supervision. Our students enter the vision therapy service in the winter quarter of the third year directly after their formal vision therapy courses. Half the class is responsible for one, three-hour session of therapy for 12 weeks. Each student receives 3 patients. Half the class is responsible for a three-hour session of either skills or perceptual evaluations. On the average they will see 10 evaluations during the
quarter. In the spring quarter, they will alternate so that by the time they enter 4th year the whole class will have evaluative and vision therapy experience. In the fourth year they enter an in house VT/Pediatric rotation for one quarter. They are in VT for 12 weeks with three patients each.

The fourth year at SUNY has two out-of-house rotations and two in-house rotations, one of which is the VT/Pediatric experience. Sixteen 4th year students can elect to stay in-house each year for a third quarter for this externship. They are exposed to an additional 12 weeks in VT and Pediatrics. During this rotation they select the special clinics in which they want to participate. All have basic VT and Pediatrics but can select any of the specialty clinics listed above and in our Infant Vision Clinic and Children with Special Needs Clinic. We constantly fill the 16 slots and unfortunately have turned students away. Most schools and colleges of optometry do not offer these programs at these intensities. The students also rotate through Beth Israel’s ophthalmology clinic, various school screening programs and staff the Ezra Medical Center, located in an orthodox Jewish community in Brooklyn. The patient population is primary pediatric and has a large vision therapy clinic.

As mentioned above, the first Chief of the Service was Dr. Flax, followed by Drs. Solan, then Press and, since 1988, by Dr. Friedman. SUNY faculty have been intimately involved with COVD. Drs. Viviano, Gruning, and Press are past COVD presidents. Drs. Byne, Groffman, Solan, and Tannen have served on the COVD Board of Directors and/or committees and given COVD certifying examinations. Every member of the Vision Therapy Service is a member of COVD.

In addition to all of those already mentioned it must be pointed out that without the support of Dr. Norman Haffner, the service could not have developed or maintained its status both at SUNY and nationally. He has been a firm believer in the importance of vision rehabilitation therapy as an integral part of optometric education. We are confident that the service will continue to flourish and grow under our new president Dr. David Heath.

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**AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE IN VT**

**GIVEN TO GRADUATING OPTOMETRY STUDENTS**

COVD is pleased to announce that the following students received the 2008 COVD Award for Excellence in Vision Therapy during graduation services this spring at their school or college of optometry.

- **Melissa Misko** – Illinois College of Optometry
- **Ghadeer A. Makoshi** – Pacific University College of Optometry
- **Efrat Keinan** – Hadassah College in Jerusalem
- **Katherine Shuell** – Ferris State University Michigan College of Optometry
- **Jeffrey D. Coleman** – Inter American University of Puerto Rico
- **Joan Harpenau** – Indiana University School of Optometry
- **Christina Williams** – University of Waterloo
- **Rebecca Maida** – New England College of Optometry
- **Emily Wu** – University of California, Berkeley
- **Benjamin Winters** – Southern College of Optometry

The COVD Excellence in Vision Therapy Award is given to recognize those students who have demonstrated a strong interest and clinical skills in vision therapy. Congratulations to each of these graduating optometrists!