Samuel Jacobson, Ophthalmology

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Samuel G. Jacobson, the William C. Frayer Professor Emeritus of ophthalmology in the Perelman School of Medicine and the founding director of Penn's Center for Hereditary Retinal Degenerations, died in January. He was 78.

Dr. Jacobson earned a BA in 1966 from the University of Illinois, then completed his MD there four years later. He completed his internship and residency at the Rush-Presbyterian St. Luke's Medical Center, Chicago, then pursued a PhD in psychophysics at the University of London, which he received in 1977. Dr. Jacobson entered the field of inherited retinal diseases when clinical specialists were rare, there was little medical or scientific interest in genetic blindness, and there were no treatments. After earning his PhD, he served residencies at MIT and Harvard in Cambridge, as well as a fellowship at the Moorfields Eye Hospital in London. In 1983, he joined the faculty of Bascom Palmer Eye Institute at the University of Miami, where he established the institute's first program for inherited retinal degenerations.

In 1995, Dr. Jacobson joined Penn's faculty as a professor of ophthalmology. In addition, he founded and was the inaugural director of the Center for Hereditary Retinal Degenerations, which advanced understanding of the molecular mechanisms and therapies for diseases previously considered incurable. In 1997, he was appointed the F.M. Kirby Professor of Molecular Ophthalmology. During his time at Penn, Dr. Jacobson also directed the retinal function department of the Scheie Eye Institute and became beloved by patients and their families for the care with which he treated them and helped them understand their conditions. Dr. Jacobson was also highly respected in the scientific community for his clinical development of numerous retinal-disease treatments, including gene and RNA therapies for several forms of retinitis pigmentosa, Leber congenital amaurosis (LCA), cone-rod dystrophies, and many other retinal conditions.

Dr. Jacobson served on the Foundation Fighting Blindness's Scientific Advisory Board, and received the foundation's Board of Directors and National Trustee Awards. "Sam Jacobson was a hero in the fight against blinding retinal diseases. He gave selflessly to the foundation, the global retinal research community, and patients and families," said Jason Menzo, chief executive officer at the foundation. "His decades of unparalleled passion and dedication to research were instrumental in moving our mission forward and advancing treatments into and through clinical trials. His impact and legacy will be forever lasting." Dr. Jacobson received the Antonio Champalimaud Vision Award in 2018 for his revolutionary work that led to LUXTURNA, the first gene therapy approved by the FDA for the eye or any inherited condition. Also in 2018, he was awarded the Proctor Medal for his research on LCA.

In his free time, Dr. Jacobson was an avid Philly sports fan. He is survived by his wife, Jean; his daughter, Maxine; and his brother, Fruman (Marian). In lieu of flowers, donations in his memory can be made to the Eugenia R. Jacobson and Max M. Jacobson, MD Memorial Scholarship Fund (#12772236) at the University of Illinois Foundation.