

WISCONSIN WOMEN MAKING HISTORY

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ALICE MCPHERSON

1926-2023

City: Madison

County: Dane

Dr. Alice McPherson was the first known woman to become a retina surgeon in the world, and she provided eye care to many through both her practice and her philanthropy.

Alice McPherson was born in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada, on June 30, 1926. Her family moved to the United States during her childhood. After multiple family members died during surgeries, McPherson decided to become a doctor. She attended the University of Wisconsin in Madison, where she earned her bachelor's degree in medical science in 1948 and her medical degree in 1951. After doing some residency (training to become an eye doctor) in Hartford, Connecticut, and Chicago, Illinois, she became the first woman to complete an ophthalmology residency at the University Hospital in Madison in 1958. She went on to do a fellowship at Harvard University Medical School. A fellowship is an optional step in medical education to learn more about a specific subject. McPherson specialized in diseases of the retina, the layer at the back of the eye that processes images and sends them to the brain, and the vitreous, the gel between the retina and the lens. In 1959, she became the first woman to complete a vitreoretinal fellowship at Harvard.

She married Tony Mierzwa in 1958, and after her fellowship, they moved to Houston, Texas. There, she joined the faculty at Baylor University College of Medicine (now Baylor College of Medicine) and founded a retina service in combination with a private practice. This was the first clinic focused on treating retinal diseases in the southern United States, making her the world's first known full-time woman retina specialist. McPherson became well known for several types of surgeries and treatments for retinal issues. She advocated for procedures that were considered progressive at the time but are now standard practice.

In addition to her medical work, McPherson was a philanthropist, supporting eye research and care. In 1969, she started the Southwest Eye Foundation in Houston with the goal of providing money for scientific research to end retinal diseases. Renamed in 1972 to the Retina Research Foundation, it has funded over 1,000 research grants and awarded over \$40 million. Starting in the mid-1980s, McPherson traveled to Victoria, Texas, twice a month to provide eye care at a local clinic for people who could not travel to Houston. She was also heavily involved in the founding of the University of Wisconsin Eye Research Institute in 2005. The goal of the institute is to bring together eye researchers to make advancements in the field of vision science. In 2012, it was renamed the McPherson Eye Research Institute in her honor.

McPherson received many awards during her career. Most notably, in 2014 she was awarded the Gonin Medal, which is considered the highest honor in ophthalmology. In 2019, she was the first person to receive the Retina Hall of Fame Lifetime Achievement Award. In addition, McPherson was the first woman president of the Retina Society and the first woman chair of the Pan-American Association of Ophthalmology.

Dr. McPherson passed away on January 16, 2023, at the age of 96.

To learn more, visit womeninwisconsin.org/profile/alice-mcpherson