



The canary in the coal mine: The COVID-19 effect on US Pediatric Ophthalmologists



Pictured above is Shira Robbins, MD with young patient.

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In recent months, the COVID-19 pandemic has shocked the world economy and left pediatric ophthalmology practices vulnerable. What is happening in the subspecialty of pediatric ophthalmology may well be representative of all fields of medicine in this country. There are fewer than 1,100 pediatric ophthalmologists available in the US to meet the eyecare needs of 75 million American children.

[Shira L. Robbins, MD](#), Professor of Ophthalmology at the Shiley Eye Institute and Anne F. and Abraham Ratner Children's Eye Center, UC San Diego Health, led a team of physicians from the American Association for Pediatric Ophthalmology and Strabismus (AAPOS) to study the effects of the pandemic on private and institutional pediatric ophthalmology practices. The dramatic findings entitled "**[The impact of the COVID-19 economic shutdown on US pediatric ophthalmologists](#)**", published recently in the *Journal of American Association for Pediatric Ophthalmology*

and Strabismus, portends grave consequences to pediatric eye surgeons, their staff and especially their patients. Patients with blinding and possibly life-threatening eye diseases may see access-of-care issues as practices close permanently or have patient backlogs.

To measure the monetary impact, the AAPOS Socio-economic Committee surveyed current US members at the peak of the COVID-19 shutdown. With a robust response rate, the survey responses indicate that some pediatric ophthalmology practices have been ominously strained, if not irreparably harmed. Dr. Robbins noted that Ratner Children's Eye Center is fortunate as they are fully open and able to support the health of children's eyes with the same cutting-edge diagnostic and treatment tools for which they are known.

Ongoing unpredictable economic conditions will ultimately decrease pediatric ophthalmologists' ability to serve patients, especially those who are most financially disadvantaged. As pediatric specialists struggle to keep their practices viable, children in the US may suffer medical outcomes not expected in first-world countries. The pace of return and rehiring of staff will be influenced by additional stimulus monies that were distributed after data collection in late April 2020. For the one-tenth of pediatric ophthalmologists who had applied for or were considering bankruptcy, one hopes that additional stimulus monies will prevent their taking that step.

Dr Robbins commented, quoting a patient, "Normal is now just a setting on the clothes dryer." She continued, "While almost all sectors of global industry were negatively affected by the pandemic, the consequences to medical subspecialties will lead to loss of practices and therefore loss of healthcare access. I expect this problem to be widespread throughout US medicine. This is an alarming, important and pivotal moment in the history of medicine. We appeal to the legislative bodies to support pediatric ophthalmologists to champion eye health and vision of our most valuable commodity – our children."

A follow-up survey is planned that will measure the pace of financial recovery and long-term effects of epidemic-related economic shutdowns on US pediatric ophthalmology.

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