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Origins of the Wills Eye Manual: Surviving the Test of Time

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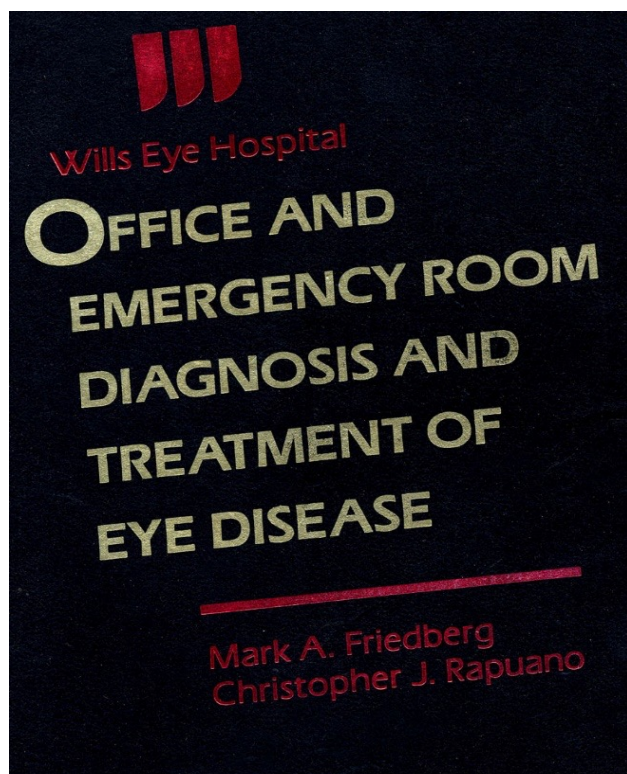
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Origins of the Wills Eye Manual: Surviving the Test of Time

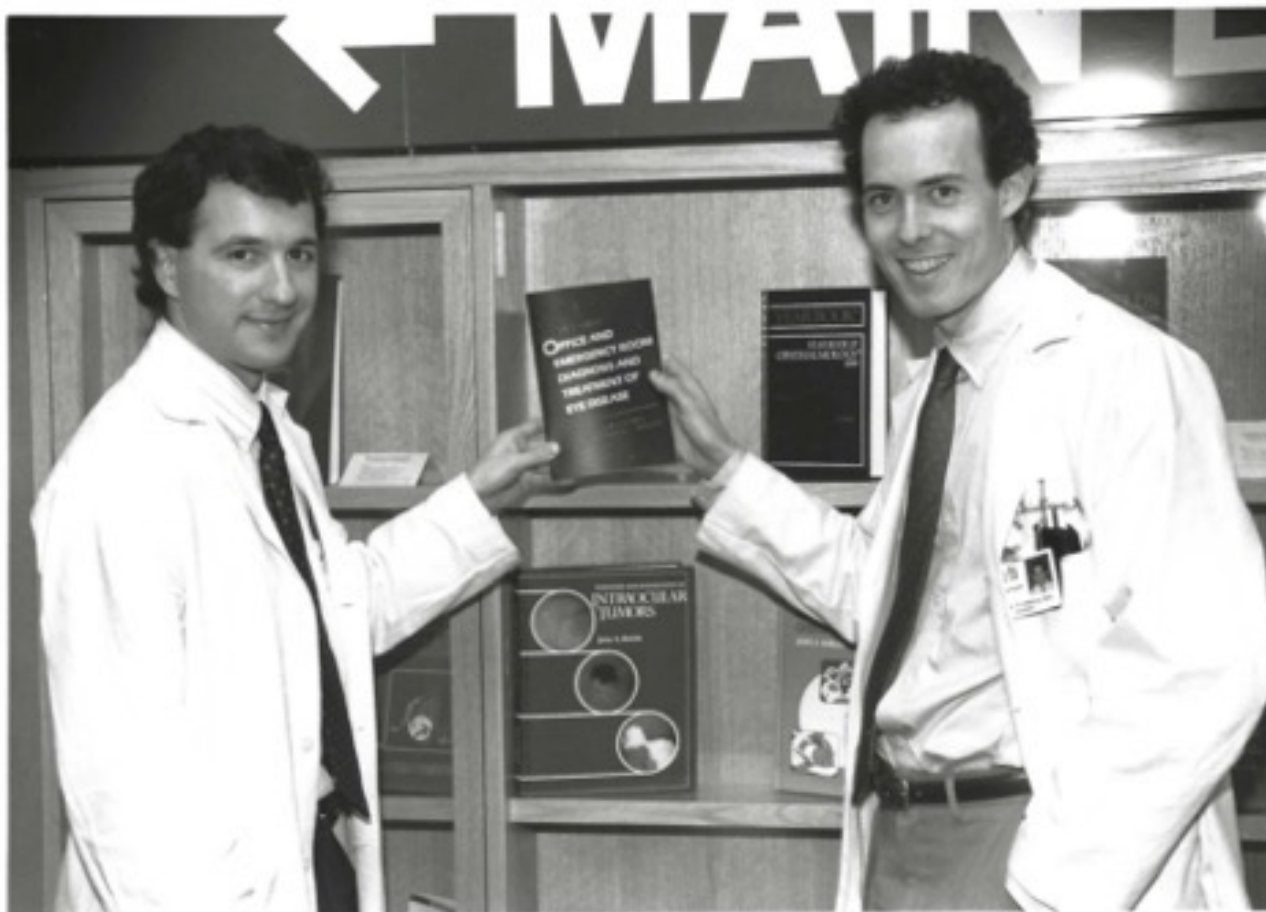
By Jordan Safran, BS | Faculty Mentor: Christopher Rapuano, MD



The first copy of the Wills Eye Manual hit the press in late 1989; it featured a black cover page with bold gold lettering and the Wills Eye logo proudly displayed on top. Published in a time before the invention of the world wide web or the advent of digital printing, this 450-page expertly sourced ocular disease reference guide took the ophthalmology world by storm. Since its debut, the manual has served as the go-to guide for trainees and seasoned physicians alike in diagnosing and treating more than 200 ocular diseases. To date, the Wills Eye Manual has published eight editions, with over 200,000 copies in circulation within ophthalmology clinics, emergency departments, and hospitals around the world.

Humble Beginnings

Considering how impactful the Wills Eye Manual is today, it is remarkable that this cornerstone publication started as a small project for two ambitious Wills Eye ophthalmology residents. Dr. Christopher Rapuano, Chief of the Cornea Service at Wills Eye and one of the two founding editors of the Wills Eye Manual, explains that the story of the Wills Eye Manual began in June of 1988 at the tail-end of his first year of residency. At the time, ophthalmology trainees spent their first year learning the ins and outs of the field by interviewing and examining patients with guidance from second-year residents. Dr. Rapuano shared how this pivotal point in his education contributed to the early beginnings of the Wills Eye Manual: "I realized that I would soon become a mentor to the first years and wanted to be prepared for the role. I started to work on a framework to organize my knowledge with a simple goal in mind, to create a rudimentary guide to the top 10-20 diagnoses encountered in the Wills Eye ophthalmology emergency department." Shortly thereafter, this undertaking led Dr. Rapuano to his classmate, Dr. Mark Friedberg, who shared a passion for making ophthalmology knowledge accessible. Discussions between them centered around two ideas: creating a booklet for ophthalmology residents in the Wills Eye ER and drafting a book about conditions

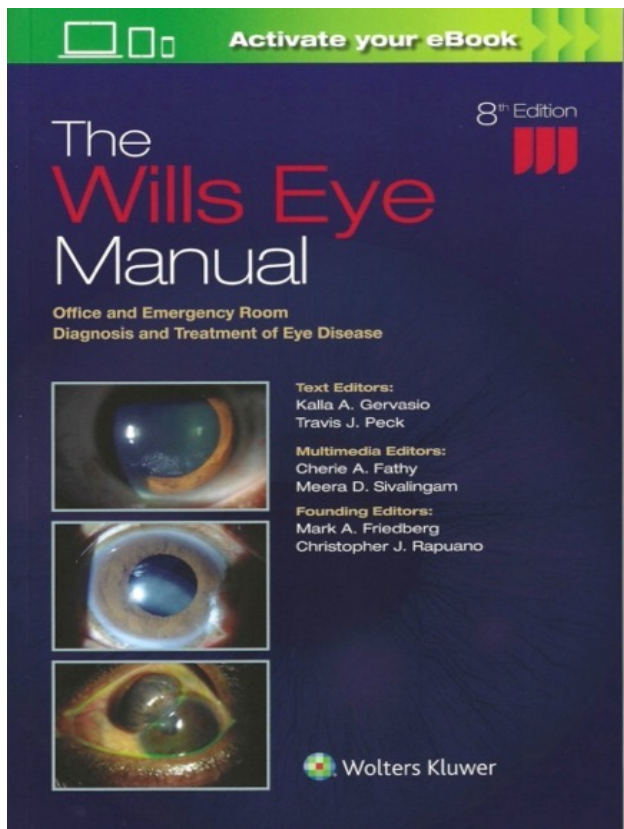


of the eye for non-ophthalmologists. Over the next few weeks, the synergy of these ideas culminated into a four-chapter-long sampler of an eye disease diagnosis and treatment guide bound for the desks of several major publishing companies.

Founding Principles

Dr. Rapuano described the vivid memory of his first encounter with a publishing company. He and Dr. Friedberg, donned in their white coats, entered an office sporting ornate wooden architecture and bookshelves lined with countless medical texts. As they took their seats, they were joined by about ten senior editors and publishers at Lea & Febiger to discuss the fate of their brainchild. For most this would be a daunting scenario, but Dr. Rapuano and Dr. Friedberg had come

prepared with an elegant proposition. “We presented our vision for the manual to the publishers” remarked Dr. Rapuano, “to create a guide that would give ophthalmologists information right at their fingertips – no pathophysiology, histology, or surgery, just the essentials to treat a patient with ocular disease. It would be soft cover, small enough to fit into a lab coat pocket and affordable.” This manual would be completed with the assistance of their entire residency class and reviewed by Wills Eye attendings. Further, they had arranged that future Wills Eye resident classes would be the successors for revising and publishing new editions of the manual. This proposal was pitched to three more publishers in Philadelphia’s Washington Square area – the epicenter for medical publication at



the time. Astonishingly, all four companies were enthralled with this revolutionary idea and offered them contracts; the to-be ophthalmologists ultimately signed a deal with J. B. Lippincott Company and the writing began.

Writing the Wills Eye Manual

Over the subsequent nine months, the Wills Eye residents worked together on the first edition of the manual. Dr. Rapuano and Dr. Friedberg served as editors and assigned sections to each of the residents in their class. Residents refined their additions to the manual by consulting with attendings at Wills Eye. Dr. Rapuano recalled these meetings fondly: “one-on-one discussions with some of the world’s leading experts for the manual enriched our understanding of ophthalmology and was the most rewarding part of the project.” The Wills Eye Manual would provide everything from pearls in ocular

oncology directly from Drs. Carol and Jerry Shields to the newest developments in glaucoma from Dr. George Spaeth. The team worked diligently to summarize the essentials, sometimes opting to include multiple perspectives in the management of certain conditions to account for discrepant expert opinions. While the original plan was to include 100 diagnoses, the final product morphed into a reference guide of over 200 conditions. The manual was submitted for publication by April and Drs. Rapuano and Friedberg were told that it was the fastest book authors had delivered to Lippincott in its history. The residents had worked tirelessly to bring their idea to fruition; however, there was still uncertainty whether the project would catch on. Impressively, the first edition sold 15,000 copies, about triple what the publishing company had hoped for.

Surviving the Test of Time

When the Wills Eye Manual was published, it was the first of its kind. While ophthalmology atlases and textbooks existed, this was the first reference guide that allowed for any physician to rapidly access reliable, practical, up-to-date information to recognize and treat a vast array of eye conditions. This was particularly groundbreaking in a time when there were no search engines or internet medical databases. Despite developments over the past 30 years such as EyeWiki and UpToDate, the Wills Eye Manual holds its ground as one of the best-selling books in ophthalmology. The manual’s continued popularity in the age of unprecedented information access may be credited to the preservation of its founding principles.

According to Dr. Rapuano, “when the contract was created for the manual, it was decided that all funds raised from sales would be directed towards the Wills Eye Residency program.” This has encouraged continued support from residents and faculty, allowing for the manual to adapt with the times without compromising its beloved simplicity and authoritative voice. Over the years, the manual incorporated color photos, and more recently has added online accessibility and video addendums. Sections within the guide have also been added to reflect the newest developments in ophthalmology such as imaging modalities.

Regarding the progress of the manual, Dr. Rapuano shares, “I am proud of the hard work residents have dedicated over the years to uphold the tradition of the Wills Eye Manual.” Dr. Rapuano has remained an integral part of the manual’s success over the years acting as the primary faculty supervisor for all subsequent editions and has continued to advance the field of ophthalmology. Since completing his cornea fellowship at the University of Iowa, his contributions to the field of ophthalmology have been numerous as one of the world’s leading experts in corneal disease, refractive surgery, and excimer laser phototherapeutic keratectomy surgery. In addition to the Wills Eye Manual, he has authored numerous works including a cornea textbook, being the series editor for the Wills Eye Color Atlas Series and over 250 peer-reviewed articles. His vision for the future of the manual is to continue including the most cutting-edge information, while never compromising



on the philosophy of practicality that lives at its core. The Wills Eye Manual will continue to be the north star for physicians navigating the complexities of ocular diagnosis and treatment, even as new discoveries abound.