

DR. CAROL LALLY SHIELDS

Dr. Carol Lally Shields is a rarity among cancer specialists. She is one of six ocular oncologists in America and she has devoted her career to treating a condition known as retinoblastoma that overwhelmingly strikes children under the age of three.

Long ago, she established a precedent for distinguishing herself. In 1979, in her senior year at Notre Dame, she captained the women's varsity basketball team and later became the first female athlete at Notre Dame to win the Byron Kaneley Award for excellence in academics by a varsity athlete.

Shields and her husband, Dr. Jerry Shields, also an eye cancer specialist, have assumed leading roles in the field. Together, they direct the largest and busiest eye cancer center in the United States, the Ocular Oncology Service of Wills Eye Hospital at Philadelphia's Thomas Jefferson University.

Eye cancer in children is such a rarity that only 250 to 300 children are diagnosed with retinoblastoma each year in the United States. This condition initially manifests as whitening of the pupil (which the doctors call leukocoria).

"Usually, it is the mother or the grandmother who first notice the white pupil. In some instances, they might also detect a crossed eye, indicating that the vision is reduced," she said.

From that point on, events move fast. The parents call their pediatrician who typically ask for an opinion from an eye doctor. Sometimes within hours, Shields will get the call. "The child usually comes to our office the same week that the tumor was discovered. We receive children from all over the United States and even overseas," she said. "Because retinoblastoma is life-threatening, we want to see the children as fast as possible."



While once there was no treatment other than eye removal, progress in the field of ocular oncology has permitted salvage of the patient's life, and now even the eye can be saved. This means that doctors can save a child's eye and possibly even protect the vision if an early diagnosis is made and chemotherapy is employed. Shields has found it rewarding "to specialize in a field where one can make a huge difference in a person's life, especially for young children."

Shields credits her Notre Dame experience in the late 1970s as a guiding influence throughout her career. "I have always felt tremendous pride that I attended the University of Notre Dame. This has given me lifelong confidence in myself and allowed me to achieve my goals," she said. "In addition, Notre Dame provided a sense of spirituality that enabled me to accept personal sacrifices to help others." A mother of a family of seven children, she is well aware that she has had to make compromises in the service of others. "But I don't regret making these sacrifices," she said. "I am fortunate to have the training, desire, and opportunity to serve others as well as my family." Shields is aware of the enormous responsibilities that go along with being pre-eminent in a field with so few specialists. Being a member of the Notre Dame community "has instilled in me a sense of self confidence that my decisions are good ones."

Shields earned her medical degree from the University of Pittsburgh. She is the author or co-author of five textbooks, 700 articles in major journals, and 142 textbook chapters, and she has delivered more than 400 lectures. She has received numerous professional awards, including the prestigious Donders Medal, given by the Netherlands Ophthalmologic Society every five years to an ophthalmologist of world fame and outstanding merit. It is considered one of the most prestigious awards in the field of ophthalmology, and Shields is the first woman to be so honored.