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New building at U-M Health System expands eye care, unites diabetes studies

Clinics at the eight-story Brehm Tower at W.K. Kellogg Eye Center Complex open to patients March 1



The W.K. Kellogg Eye Center Complex, including the Kellogg research tower at left and the new Brehm Tower at right. Image courtesy of University of Michigan Health System.

ANN ARBOR, MI – March 1, 2010 – On March 1, the first eye patients entered an innovative new \$132 million facility that expands the University of Michigan Health System’s capacity for eye care, research and education, and unites diabetes researchers as they work to accelerate the search for a cure and prevention of diabetes.

The Brehm Tower at the W.K. Kellogg Eye Center Complex includes 230,000 square feet spanning eight stories and makes a striking addition to the skyline of the medical campus. It is adjacent to the existing Kellogg Eye Center research tower on Wall Street in Ann Arbor.

The new building houses seven eye care clinics with new suites for refractive surgery and cosmetic surgery. On the upper floors, the Brehm Center for Diabetes Research, and laboratories for vision scientists, will foster discoveries in both ophthalmology and diabetes.

“Eye disease and diabetes both pose growing challenges to our nation’s health, and Kellogg and Brehm scientists will help us continue to lead the way in both fields,” says Ora Hirsch Pescovitz, M.D., executive vice president for medical affairs and chief executive officer of UMHS.

The architect, TSA of Massachusetts (also known as **KlingStubbins**), created a building that is modern in design but incorporates features to create a warm and welcoming environment. Large windows and a full wall of glass panels on the building’s facade allow natural light to fill the clinics and common space, of particular benefit to patients whose vision is impaired.

“Construction of the new building, just across the river from the main medical campus, is an important part of our master plan and expansion of our system,” says Douglas L. Strong, director and chief executive officer of the U-M Hospitals and Health Centers.

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Clinics have space for patient education and comfortable waiting areas designed to aid patient flow. Research areas feature open laboratories to encourage collaboration and provide flexibility as research projects grow.

“Creating this clinical care and research facility shows confidence in the ground-breaking work undertaken by our scientists and the impact they will have on future treatment options,” says James O. Woolliscroft, M.D., dean of the U-M Medical School.

Notes Paul R. Lichter, M.D., chair of Ophthalmology & Visual Sciences and director of the Kellogg Eye Center, “This project has significantly expanded the Eye Center, allowing us to serve a rapidly growing and aging patient population and expand the critical mass of scientists needed to advance research aimed at preserving vision. We often say that we can help patients one at a time in the clinic, but we can help the world in our labs. That’s what we will do in this new building.”

Made possible by part of a gift given to the U-M Medical School by Delores and William Brehm in 2004, the building also serves as the main laboratory component of the U-M Comprehensive Diabetes Center. The gift was motivated by the couple’s desire to find a cure for type 1 diabetes, the disease that Mrs. Brehm has been coping for 60 years.

“We started with the goal of accelerating diabetes research but our approach was to go beyond creating bricks and mortar and to foster a new paradigm in how medical research is conducted,” says Bill Brehm. “The building is designed to enhance collaboration among researchers as they translate discoveries in the laboratory into practical treatment options.”

The Brehm Center spaces feature an open laboratory layout to encourage collaboration, shared procedure and equipment areas, a central connecting staircase and centrally located lab services. It also houses cutting-edge facilities for communication and data-sharing among diabetes researchers throughout U-M and beyond.

“Like in any vibrant and growing medical center, research space is terribly precious and scarce,” says Peter Arvan, M.D., Ph.D., the Brehm Professor of Type 1 Diabetes Research, chief of the Division of Metabolism, Endocrinology & Diabetes and director of the Comprehensive Diabetes Center. “Bill Brehm has jump-started the process of making Michigan the leading national center for diabetes research.”

The proximity is expected to help U-M vision researchers and diabetes researchers collaborate on studies of eye-related complications of diabetes, notably diabetic retinopathy.

People with either form of diabetes — type 1, sometimes called “juvenile” diabetes, and type 2, which is linked to obesity — are especially prone to eye disease. Many of them will, over time, lose some or all of their eyesight due to diabetic retinopathy. People with diabetes are also far more prone to other eye diseases, including glaucoma and cataracts.

In addition to a national reputation in studies of diabetic retinopathy, the U-M is a leader in other areas of vision care and research, including cataracts, glaucoma, age-related macular degeneration (AMD), and other conditions of the aging eye. U-M offers such advanced clinical options as “bladeless” laser surgery first developed at U-M and cutting edge metabolic imaging of the retina for early detection of disease.

Among recent Kellogg research efforts is a study to understand how photoreceptors – light-sensing cells essential for vision – can be preserved or even replaced to restore vision. The eye center is also developing a major research and treatment program for Graves’ eye disease and other autoimmune conditions, and plans to begin testing several promising therapies for these diseases.

On April 23, UMHS will formally dedicate the building with a “Dedicated to Discovery” ceremony featuring tours of the building, musical celebrations, conferences for ophthalmologists and diabetes researchers, and a dedication event with remarks by Francis S. Collins, M.D., Ph.D., director of the National Institutes of Health, and Paul A. Sieving, M.D., Ph.D., director of the National Eye Institute.

The advanced eye clinics will have much more space in the new building at a time when it is very much needed. Eye disease is costly and the aging population drives the need for new treatments and cures for disease. By 2030, people age 65 and older are expected to account for 20 percent of the population. The estimated cost of eye disease and vision loss in the U.S. is \$68 billion annually.

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