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Institute's research 'pushes new boundaries'

by Linda Chiem Pacific Business News



Founder Michael Bennett built the Retina Institute of Hawaii on retinal surgery, but its clinical research into possible cures and treatments for eye conditions sets it apart.

Michael Bennett founded the Retina Institute of Hawaii with a straightforward mission: enhance the quality of life by improving sight, preventing blindness and advancing medical knowledge through research.

Eight years later, he has expanded his two-person practice to a 40-employee vision-care center regarded as one of the nation's leading retina treatment practices.

The Retina Institute is the winner of PBN's Business Leadership Hawaii Best in Business II award.

The institute built its foundation on a burgeoning retinal surgery practice, which uses the latest medical technology, like lasers and diagnostics, to treat serious eye conditions such as macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy, retinal detachment and ocular tumors.

But, what sets it apart is its active involvement in clinical research.

"I always had a big interest in surgery and advancing medicine and its evolution," Bennett told PBN. "Traditionally, doctors in our field were used to following x-y-z protocol and a lot of medicine was a dogma for the years. In today's world, that's obsolete because the technology has far surpassed the standards set before."

The institute currently is participating in 13 clinical trials that allows it to offer its patients the latest in alternative or state-of-the-art treatments and therapies.

For example, it is one of just 26 sites in the country conducting clinical trials for NeoVista's Novel Wet AMD Therapy, an alternative treatment for a type of macular

degeneration cited as the leading cause of vision loss and blindness in Americans age 65 and older.

Since 2006, the institute has seen revenue grow between 20 percent and 25 percent annually — just one measure of success that Bennett attributes to his team of technicians, clinicians and ophthalmologists and Hawaii's medical community.

"The reason we're successful is because our community of doctors are unbelievable at picking things up," he said. "They're sharp and savvy, and basically our gatekeepers, to identifying conditions early so we can slow it down or make it better. They don't stick to the status quo."

The institute also is in the process of securing at least four patents on several types of surgery techniques and devices, Bennett said.

"We have new ways of looking at retinas and data sets and lasers that people are now coming to us and asking about," he said. "We're constantly pushing new boundaries."

He said the institute is committed to delivering high-quality eye health care to all Hawaii residents, especially in underserved areas.

In addition to its main Honolulu offices at the Yacht Harbor Professional Center on Ala Moana Boulevard, the institute has five satellite offices in Wahiawa and Waianae on Oahu, in Kahului on Maui and in Hilo and Kona on the Big Island.

Bennett and his doctors travel to each of the Neighbor Island sites almost weekly.

In response to patient demand and despite the recession, he joined a Kahului ophthalmologist in opening a new vision-care center called Center for Sight Maui.

"Disease continues despite economic forces and I don't think what we do is considered elective because they are time-sensitive issues," Bennett said.

In addition to working to advance science and new treatment options, the institute considers itself the people's advocate for prevention and education. In November 2007, it invested more than \$300,000 to launch Project Vision, a non-profit mobile program that provides free retinal screenings. The money was used to transform a 35-foot bus into an examination laboratory complete with digital imaging equipment.

Volunteer physicians, including most of the institute's staff, take Project Vision to Oahu's rural communities and provide free eye screenings to at-risk populations at monthly events. High-quality photos taken of the inside of the eye during these screenings help detect retinal ailments and other eye disorders, such as cataracts and glaucoma, as well as high blood pressure and diabetes.

Approximately 2,100 people have been screened through Project Vision in the past two years. Approximately 40 percent of them were found to have abnormalities in at least one eye, further highlighting the need for early detection.

In addition to being a frequent fixture at community and senior centers across Oahu, Project Vision has set up at community events such as the Great Aloha Run Health Expo and the Sheraton Hawaii Bowl. Through partnerships with various chapters of The Lions Club of Hawaii and the American Diabetes Association, the Project Vision bus has even been shipped to Molokai and the Big Island, with the help of Young Brothers Ltd., to screen Neighbor Island residents.

“This has jumped to the next stratosphere and every month we need more volunteers and grants because every pocket of a population has a different appetite,” Bennett said.

He said one elderly local resident who learned he had macular degeneration after getting screened through Project Vision donated \$5,000 to the nonprofit because he was moved by its mission.

As the Retina Institute’s profile grows, Bennett travels to the Mainland or abroad at least once a month to attend industry meetings as a guest lecturer or speaker on a variety of topics related to retinal health and medical technology.

The self-proclaimed physics geek still marvels at how much impact the company and his practice have made on the Hawaii community since he moved to the Islands more than a decade ago.

“I never really wanted to grow, and the goal was not to be some giant engine,” he said. “But there was small change, demand rose and the growth just perpetuated expanding. We just focus on our core mission, which is finding the best care for people, and add to that this neat science — we’re really making a change.”

The institute’s work often is described as groundbreaking and Bennett’s approach to it has generated admiration and respect from other retinal health professionals.