Jakob Grauslund—balancing theory and practice in Odense

In the latest edition of Oftalmolog's *Portrait of Excellence, our Editor-in-Chief asked some investigative questions of another exceptional colleague from the Nordic Region—Jakob Grauslund. Professor Grauslund has not only excelled in the clinical field but also been a leader in academia, becoming Head of Research at age 35. In this article, he shares some insight into how he managed to balance it all and why he is hopeful for the future, having supervised more than 90 students over the years.*

What does a typical day look like for you?

As a Clinical Professor, my days are split between clinical and academic duties. In the clinic, I mainly work as a Chief Physician in medical retina—treating mostly diabetic retinopathy, age-related macular degeneration, and retinal vein occlusion. Likewise, I am honored to manage the Diabetic Retinopathy Grading Centre at the Steno Diabetes Center Odense, which is a telemedicine-based facility serving more than 7,000 patients annually from eight different hospital units in our region. Although these are all high-volume facilities, I really enjoy this part of my work, as it is amazingly fruitful to be a part of an outstanding team, which helps so many patients maintain and improve their vision.

On academic days, I work on my key projects in the morning, as life has mercilessly turned my personality into an early-rising type A person. This leaves the afternoon (and on a lucky day, the evening) for meetings, teaching, and other activities.

Becoming the first Scandinavian member of the Macula Society.

Jakob Grauslund — by the numbers

Appointed Clinical Professor at age **38**
193 peer-reviewed publications, including **32** so far in 2023
Principal supervisor of **78** Master's and PhD students
Main author of Danish guidelines for screening and treatment of diabetic retinopathy
Scientific fingerprint for diabetic retinopathy: **#1** in Northern Europe, **#16** world-wide

Enjoying Amsterdam with the great Anne Katrin Sjølie

You were appointed Head of Research and Clinical Professor at a fairly young age. How has the journey been so far?

I had the amazing fortune to be supervised by Professor Anne Katrin Sjølie, who was one of the most outstanding and dedicated human beings I have ever met. She taught me so many important lessons in science and life. When she sadly passed away, I abruptly found myself as a 35-year-old resident, who was suddenly Head of Research and main supervisor of five PhD students. Having a family with two small kids as well, these were challenging years, and, to be honest, it really took me some years to find my own way. In the end, what tended to work the best for me was just having a small piece of paper in my drawer saying: "What would Anne Katrin do in this situation?" Having made peace with the fact that there is no miracle solution for most problems, and getting inspiration from the people that I admire, is really something that has helped me through the years.

How has the field of medical retina changed over the last 15 years, and what will the future bring?

The introduction of intravitreal therapy has really revolutionized ophthalmology, and it is amazing to witness how the number of blind people is decreasing rapidly. However, this has also turned ophthalmology into the busiest specialty of all, and with the increasing aging of the population, we might just have seen the tip of the iceberg.

How did you became interested in doing research?

I went into research pretty open-minded but also without major ambitions. However, it did not take Anne Katrin long to open my eyes to all of the opportunities to make new discoveries and change the field. It was really amazing to learn from her example of how the journey of research can change the lives of so many.

What would be your keys for successfully building a strong team?

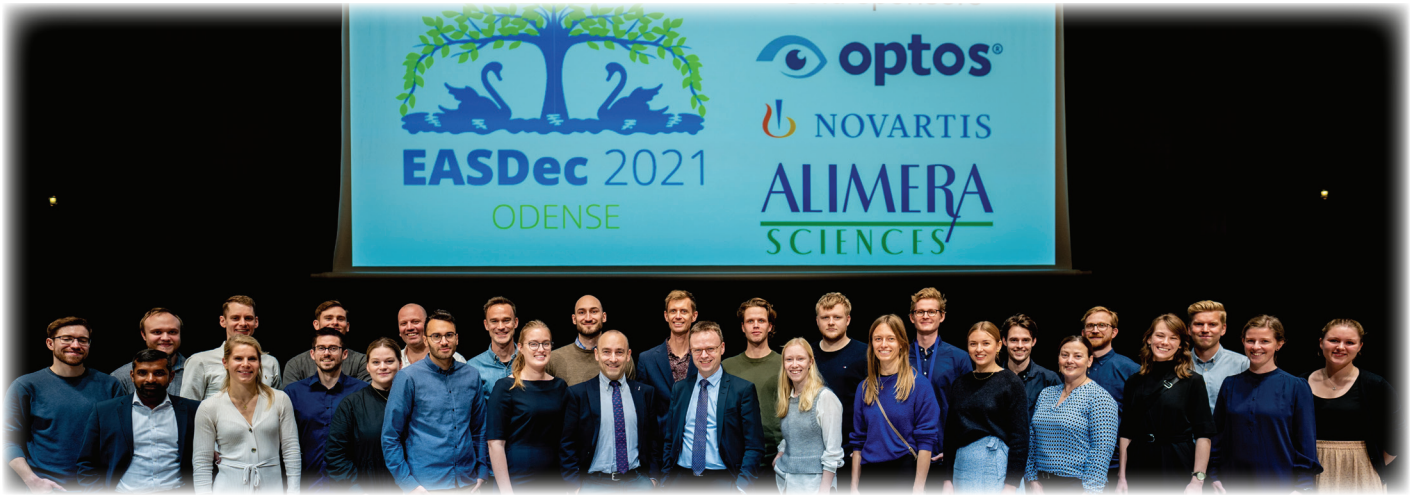
Over the last 10 years, I have had the amazing honor of acting as the principal supervisor of 78 PhD and master's students, who have all been unique in their own way. As a research leader, it is so important to build up a group of people interacting and helping each other. The former American president Franklin D. Roosevelt might have put this the best: "I am not the smartest fellow in the world, but I sure can pick smart colleagues." This is really the philosophy of our research group. We all work hard and are dedicated to attracting young talent before they graduate from medical school. Through the years, it has really been amazing to watch people growing from pregraduate researchers through PhD students to ophthalmic residents and, ultimately, highly esteemed senior doctors and high-class academic faculty members.

> "I am not the smartest fellow in the world, but I sure can pick smart colleagues."
>
> Franklin D. Roosevelt

Quality time with his research group— in both formal (top of next page) and more informal (above) meetings.

What is your vision for future research and innovation at the Eye Department at Odense University Hospital?

For my part, I do most of my research in the screening and treatment of diabetic retinopathy and medical retinal diseases, including setting up national initiatives in artificial intelligence, virtual learning, and epidemiological, register-based research, as I believe that these are some of the keys that will take us to the future in ophthalmology. Nevertheless, what excites me the most is that we now have a variety of research areas spearheaded by a number of excellent Associate Professors: Anne Stage Vergmann (virtual learning), Lasse Cehofski (translational science), Yousif Subhi (evidence-based ophthalmology), Anders Vestergaard (glaucoma and real-world validation studies), and Jimmi Wied (education and ophthalmic surgery). Having all of these remarkable people on the team really makes the future look bright.



In recent years, you have been heading major national initiatives on research and clinical guidelines. What has been your experience with this?

First of all, it is a great honor—and good fun too—to be heading national initiatives on academic and clinical issues. Bringing so many dedicated experts together from the entire country can really make a difference, and, actually, it connects very well to the last question. In the upcoming years, we really need to take a close look at how we should make the best of our resources. One of the most important discussions here would be to consider whether any patients could safely attend fewer ophthalmic visits than previously. Having this in mind, we are currently launching new clinical guidelines for diabetic retinopathy screening in Denmark, which would extend the screening intervals for most patients. This can reduce the annual number of screening visits in Denmark by approximately 50,000. For me, that is quite a lot, and I hope that this may open up similar initiatives for other ophthalmic diseases.

How would you advise future colleagues on the verge of embarking on a journey in ophthalmic research?

Step 1: Find an excellent and dedicated supervisor
Step 2: Ask some of his or her students whether they are happy to be a part of the group
Step 3: Go for it and give it all that you have! Work hard, stay open-minded, meet your deadlines, and put all of your enthusiasm and personality into the project and the group.
Step 4: Enjoy the journey, and do not forget to use the gifts that you learn from research for the rest of your career.

Football supporters: Jakob and Noah rooting for their favorite team — Sønderjyske.

Family trip to Yosemite National Park

With so much great work in the clinic and on cutting-edge research, do you have any spare time for family and friends?

I have tried (but not always succeeded) to work hard and remain dedicated while at work and then keep the computer shut while at home. I really enjoy spending time with my fantastic wife and our two amazing kids, Noah and Vilma, aged 10 and 13. We love traveling, playing football, reading about history, drinking port wine (ok—that is mostly me), and spending time with our family and friends. As a good colleague once told me: "Remember that in 25 years, the only ones that remember all of your working hours are your kids."