In the spotlight

Associate Professor Yousif Subhi—clincal-focused, evidence-based retinology

Oftalmolog is excited to turn the spotlight on Associate Professor and medical retina specialist, Yousif Subhi. A fast-rising star in the field of opthalmology and recipient of numerous awards and accolades, Yousif discusses how he came to specialize in the field, his research journey, and his view on the future. As a young and accomplished scholar, we wanted to highlight his work as an inspiration for other young doctors and share his advice for future researchers.

What does a typical day look like for you?

My day starts early at 5:00. I hit the gym and hurry back home to prepare for early family time: my wife and I spend some time with our three kids before getting out of the door. I guess that life changes people—my mornings are much busier and more meaningful now than ever before.

I am usually ready at Rigshospitalet by 7:45. I spend a few minutes getting an overview of the day. We are a very large medical retina clinic—the largest in the Nordics—which means that around 400 patients visit our clinic daily. In clinic, my role can be as a clinical supervisor, where my sole work is to help, educate, and facilitate the work of our junior colleagues, nurses, and optometrists. Sometimes I also have my own list of patients. Clinics are fun, I love the interactions.

Meet the team. *Our team of medical retina specialists at Rigshospitalet.*

On my academic days, I often have teaching, meetings, and supervision. But I have also learned that if I do not block off time for deep work, it disappears. So, I try to allocate time to be alone with my ideas, to write them down, let them mature, and pilot them.

My wife is so understanding of my ambitions, and I am extremely lucky and grateful to have someone like her in my life. We can always carve out time for me to finish the ideation process—that deep work—that is needed for meaningful progress. I spend almost all weekends on academic work. In return, I prioritize my evenings for family time. I cook for my family and take great pride in providing good, nourishing food for my own people. And it makes me happy to see that this is something my children take up—my 9-years old daughter cooks for her friends when they visit. And she makes an amazing spaghetti carbonara!

How did your journey in ophthalmology begin?

I originally wanted to study software engineering but went with medicine because the parties were legendary. While studying medicine, I realized that I still had a thirst for data, numbers, gadgets, and computers. When I saw the opportunity to practice medicine in a field where tech played a big role, I knew that I had found my specialty.

I was fortunate to get into the ophthalmology department in Roskilde, which is a small, cozy department with very kind individuals. There, I had amazing research supervision. I try to reflect on those interactions, when I think of how to inspire and motivate younger colleagues today.

From Roskilde, I went on to new adventures at the bigger department at Rigshospitalet and have been there ever since. It is a privilege to work in such a big environment, where people can dedicate themselves to small areas of ophthalmology and strive for excellence.

Buon appetito! *Yousif's daughter with her famous carbonara.*

The importance of "we." Morning meeting at the Department of Ophthalmology at Rigshospitalet.

"...start thinking how can we all do better..."

Meet Associate Professor Yousif Subhi:

- Born 1989 in Iraq from where his family sought refuge in Denmark.
- Father of 3 children, husband to a great wife.
- 174 peer-reviewed publications; h-index 35; >4,000 citations.
- Ranked #20 globally in age-related macular degeneration research (according to ScholarGPS)
- Author/co-author of national and international clinical guidelines in ophthalmology
- Editorial board member/associate editor of several international journals, including *Acta Ophthalmologica, American Journal of Ophthalmology International, European Journal of Ophthalmology, International Journal of Retina and Vitreous,* and *Ophthalmology & Therapy*
- Recipient of 10+ national and international awards
- Main or co-supervisor of 5 PhDs and 5 master's students, and previous supervisor of 40+ other students

Forging new paths. The first Scandinavian to receive the Ophthalmologica Award for my work in evidence-based retinology. Euretina 2024, Barcelona, Spain.

What made you decide on your topic of research?

I did my early work and PhD on the immunology of AMD (age-related macular degeneration) and PCV (polypoidal choroidal vasculopathy). I really enjoyed that; we made meaningful contributions to science, published a lot of papers, and even obtained a patent. However, during the last year of my PhD, something horrible happened. My mom was diagnosed with a hematological cancer. I supported her and accompanied her to doctor's appointments.

As a doctor, it is interesting to be on the receiving end. Obviously, I cannot imagine how it must be to have cancer, but as a bystander, at least I could hear my mom's frustrations. One doctor recommended one treatment, another doctor recommended something else. We were left with a lot of frustration. She had so many questions but received so few answers. She felt as if the system was unsure of itself and perhaps not exactly designed with the patient in mind.

From that point on, I wanted to improve medicine. I am not a hematologist. What I could do was to focus on my own specialty: clarification of evidence-based best knowledge, best practice, preferred treatment, and evidence-based answers to common patient questions. And guidelines to help streamline the information to the clinicians, at least to a certain degree.

I changed my research to evidence-based retinology. I also decided three ground rules for my work:

#1: Research must deal with clinical practice.
#2: Research must be collaborative. Whatever work I do, it should reach many patients. This requires research to involve as many colleagues as possible.
#3: Research must be fun. When we collaborate, often times, these are clinically active individuals who use their spare time. I really try to organize the work so that people contribute because they enjoy the work.

So far, this has worked for me. And I believe that we are making meaningful strides towards evidence-based retinal practice. Our work finds its way into AAO books, teaching material, and clinical guidelines. That makes me very happy.

What lessons have you learned in your career so far?

#1 **Mentorship matters.**
I have been fortunate to learn from inspiring senior colleagues such as Jakob Grauslund, Morten la Cour, and Line Kessel. Without them, I would not be where I am today. And I really need to emphasize an important point I learned from all of them, of being extremely generous. In a senior position, it is important to pave the way for younger colleagues: projects, authorships, interviews, opportunities. Always think whether you can put a new talent upfront. I also learned that you should avoid focusing on yourself or your group but need to embrace and empower the entire community. When you start thinking, how can ***we all*** do it better, then you realize that you need to do things differently.

#2 **Stay curious.**
You don't need a full plan from the start—be open to opportunities. For me, the opportunities along the road have defined my role today.

#3 **Communication is key.**
Research only matters if you tell people your results. My students know that I am very passionate about this. I stress the importance of publishing the work, going to conferences, and speaking with other people.

What is your vision for the future of retinal care?

We are at a fascinating point where medicine, technology, and health system innovation are coming together. Teleophthalmology will allow us to decentralize care, making it more accessible. AI will allow deeper insight into disease and allow better disease prediction and treatment personalization. Automation tools will reduce time and costs. Task shifting will allow other healthcare professionals and optometrists to take a larger role, with ophthalmologists focusing on where we truly add value.

But I want to emphasize something that is sometimes forgotten when we talk about the future. *The use of new technology is not the goal in itself. The goal has always been to give patients better care with less burden.* Therefore, our approach to the future should be evidence-based and rigorous, as it has always been.

"the goal has always been to give patients better care"

Communication is key. *A lecture on the very small but important optical coherence tomography (OCT) lesions paracentral acute middle maculopathy (PAMM) and retinal ischemic perivascular lesions (RIPL), as well as our research on the topic. Society of Danish Ophthalmologists (DØO) 2025 meeting, Hindsgavl Slot, Denmark.*

What advice would you give to a new doctor or researcher early in their career?

Choose a field that excites you. Work hard to learn the skills and the routines so that it becomes second nature. And surround yourself with good mentors and colleagues, so that all that work just becomes fun. From there, when you want to carve out a field of your own; perseverance, generosity, and kindness become important traits. And please never forget that patients are not just diagnoses. They are individuals with individual needs, and they are the source of meaning in the crazy world we call medicine.

"never forget... patients are not just diagnoses"

The next generation. Group photo with some of my amazingly talented students and young colleagues after their presentation at the annual meeting of the Danish Ophthalmological Society. From left to right: Anne Helene Køllund Nissen, Lars Christian Boberg-Ans, Yousif Subhi, Jakob Bjerager, Andreas Arnold-Vangsted, Amanda Palbo.

Do you have any spare time for friends and other activities?

I quote Socrates: "beware the emptiness of a busy life." If the balance tips too much, you are left with nothing beyond the work. And not seeing friends would be completely against my nature. I only ask that food and wine play a role, then I will always make time for fun.

Finding balance. Spending time with friends is crucial for a good work-life balance. Top, left to right: Yousif Subhi, Michael Stormly Hansen, Oliver Niels Klefter; bottom, left to right: Danson V. Muttuvelu, Marie Louise Roed Rasmussen, Yousif Subhi.

"beware the emptiness of a busy life"

-Socrates

From mentee to mentor in under 10 years

- 2015 MD, University of Copenhagen
- 2018 PhD, University of Copenhagen
- 2021 Associate Professor of Ophthalmology, University of Southern Denmark
  Bagger-Sørensen Ung Forskerpris
- 2023 FEBO
- 2024 Specialist in Ophthalmology and subspecialist in Medical Retina, Rigshospitalet
  Clinical Associate Professor of Ophthalmology, University of Copenhagen
  AAO Secretariat Award
  Ophthalmologica Award (EURETINA 2024)
- 2025 *Oftalmolog's* Portrait of Excellence