

# Iva Dekaris

*Medicinska direktorica Specijalne bolnice za oftalmologiju Svjetlost i predsjednica Europskog udruženja očnih banaka govori o najsvremenijim kirurškim metodama spašavanja vida i budućnosti zdravstvenog turizma nakon pandemije*

*We talked to the medical director of the Svjetlost Eye Clinic and president of the European Eye Bank Association about latest surgical methods of eyesight correction and the post-pandemic future of health tourism*

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Photos Damir Kalogjera & Iva Dekaris archive

**N**evjerojatna je lakoća s kojom prof. dr. sc. Iva Dekaris govori o kompliciranim operacijama spašavanja vida. U 25 godina kirurškog rada, preciznom rukom, golemim znanjem i vidom bez dioptrija, izvela ih je više od 20.000 - od ultrazvučnih operacija mrežnice, transplantacija rožnice pa do ugradnje multifokalnih leća. Usavršavala se na prestižnim svjetskim sveučilištima, objavila više od 300 stručnih i znanstvenih radova, od čega pedesetak u renomiranim medicinskim časopisima i među vodećim je svjetskim autoritetima za kirurgiju oka. Smirena, zadovoljna, realizirana profesionalno i privatno, dobro se nosi s izazovima pred kojim se našla Klinika Svjetlost, vodeća regionalna bolnica za oftalmologiju.

**Kako je biti medicinska direktorica Specijalne bolnice za oftalmologiju u vrijeme pandemije koronavirusa?**

Naša Klinika stalno je otvorena. Ambulantno zbrinjavamo hitne oftalmološke slučajeve, ali i izvodimo hitne operacije poput odljepljenja retine, koje se za vrijeme posebnog režima ne obavljaju u državnim bolnicama. Kao medicinska direktorica moram stalno pratiti stavove stručnijih od mene, kolega infektologa i epidemiologa, te sukladno njihovim odlukama brinuti se o zaštiti medicinskih djelatnika i bolesnika koji nam dolaze. Naravno da je opseg posla značajno manji nego u 'normalno' doba, a privatna smo ustanova koja se financira

Professor Iva Dekaris, PhD, talks about complicated eyesight restoring surgery as casually as she was talking about the weather. In her twenty-five years of practice, she has performed more than 20,000 surgeries - ultrasound cataract surgeries, cornea transplants, multifocal lens implants - all with the same steady hand, bottomless knowledge and unwavering eye. Professor Dekaris has perfected her craft at some of the most prestigious academic institutions in the world, published over 300 scientific papers and is considered to be one of the most skilled ophthalmologists in the world. Calm and composed, fulfilled professionally and privately, Dekaris can at her helm at Svjetlost Eye Clinic handle anything life throws at her - even unexpected situations arising from a global pandemic.

**What's it like to be a medical director of an eye clinic amid the corona virus pandemic?**

We have been working without any breaks. Our day clinic has been taking care of ocular emergencies and performing emergency surgeries, like retina detachment surgeries, which at the time are not performed in public hospitals due to the pandemic. My job as the medical director is to take into consideration all information presented by my expert colleagues from the fields of infectious diseases and epidemiology, and to create protocols for our clinic in respect to the safety of our medical personnel and our patients. Of course, we aren't performing as many surgeries as usually. We are a private clinic, with no other financing than our earnings, so being open and working is good for both our staff and our patients. We haven't had to let anyone go, which means a lot to all our employees in this precarious moment.

**Which procedures are the most complicated and why?**

High-risk cornea transplants are technically demanding, and post-operative therapy is highly personalized, which means the physician has to monitor the patient over a long period of time. But that's the beauty of my work: there is very little routine, and you have to keep perfecting your skills and adding to your knowledge. When I was little, my father used to say, 'The more you learn, the more you understand how little you know.'

**How much has ophthalmology changed since you started your specialization?**

If someone had told me then how far we would come, I'd hardly believe them. Ophthalmology has changed drastically. When I was starting out, most surgeons performed classical cataract surgery, without the use of ultrasound. That surgery left a long scar on the eye, the organ healed much more slowly,



isključivo od svog rada. No postupamo dobro, i za bolesnike i za osoblje. Kod nas nitko nije dobio otkaz, što u ova krizna vremena zaposlenicima mnogo znači.

**Koje su očne operacije najkompliciranije i zašto?**

Visoko rizične transplantacije rožnice, često kombinirane s drugim bolestima oka, čiji je zahvat tehnički zahtjevan, a postoperacijska terapija vrlo individualizirana, tako da liječnik treba pažljivo i dugotrajno pratiti bolesnika. U tome i jest ljepota mog posla: malo toga je rutina, te ga bez stalnog stručnog i znanstvenog usavršavanja ne možeš dobro raditi. Pantim riječi oca koji mi je kao maloj govorio: 'Što više u životu znaš i naučiš, to si više svjestan koliko još toga ne znaš.'

**Koliko su se promijenila postignuća u oftalmologiji u odnosu na vrijeme vaše specijalizacije?**

Da mi je netko tada govorio koliko ćemo napredovati, teško bih mu povjerovala. No oftalmologija se drastično promijenila. Kada sam počela raditi, većina kirurga još je operirala mreću na klasičan način, bez ultrazvuka. Bolesnik je imao dugačak rez na oku, vid se sporije oporavljao, komplikacija je bilo više, a krajnji vidni rezultat slabiji nego danas. Baš u vrijeme moje specijalizacije u bolnici Sveti Duh, prof. Nikica Gabrić je nabavio prvi ultrazvučni aparat za operacije mreće, čime je u Hrvatskoj započela njezina nova era, a ja sam bila na pravom mjestu da uz njega učim taj zahvat. I transplantacija rožnice radila se na zastarjeli način, bez provjere kvalitete donorskog tkiva u očnim bankama. Tada je možda izgledalo nedostižno, no danas k nama u Svjetlost dolaze bolesnici iz mnogo razvijenijih zemalja svijeta radi kvalitete kirurgije

possibility for complications were many and ultimately, the results were less satisfying. During my residency in the University Hospital Sveti Duh, professor Nikica Gabrić, PhD acquired the very first ultrasound device for cataract surgery, so I was in right place at the right time. Cornea transplants were also still performed the old-fashioned way, without checking the quality of the donor tissue in eye banks. Back then it was just a dream to reach the skill and quality level of renowned world clinics, but these days our clinic welcomes international patients from many more advanced countries, who come for our skill and expertise. It's wonderful to know that a small country like Croatia is known for quality, and that our clinic uses more advanced lenses and equipment than most European and American eye clinics.

**You will be president of the European Eye Bank Association until 2022. None of your colleagues have been selected for that duty twice in a row. What makes you special?**

My colleagues on the EEBA administrative council often compliment me on several things: I am always the first to give my opinion on administrative processes, the fastest to answer e-mails and the first to openly declare my thoughts on any professional questions. Ever since 1995, I have participated in the work of the EEBA: publishing scientific papers, as well as giving my suggestions on reorganization of the association. As a surgeon I make decisions fairly quickly and







*U wetlabu s učenicama koje uče operacije mrežne (1), za vrijeme kongresa u Japanu (2), na planinarenju s kćerkom (3)*

*In the wetlab with students practicing cataract surgery techniques (1), During a congress in Japan (2), Hiking with her daughter (3)*

oka koju pružamo. Prekrasan je osjećaj da mala Hrvatska može biti svjetski poznati centar za operacije oka i koristiti naprednije oblike leća i opreme nego većina europskih ili američkih očnih centara.

**Do 2022. predsjednica ste Europskog udruženja očnih banaka - EEBA. Nikoga do sada nisu na tu funkciju birali dva puta za redom. Zašto vas jesu?**

Jedan od najčešćih komentara mojih suradnika u Upravnom vijeću EEBA-e jest da uvijek prva kažem svoje mišljenje o načinu upravljanja i stručnim upitima, te da najbrže odgovaram na mailove. Još od 1995. stručnim i znanstvenim radovima te prijedlozima o reorganizaciji sudjelujem u radu EEBA-a. Kako sam po struci kirurg, odluke donosim relativno brzo, bez suvišnih nekonstruktivnih rasprava, i kada treba potegnuti i puno raditi, nemam problem. Prije preuzimanja funkcije predsjednice prvo sam bila član Upravnog vijeća EEBA-e, i zalagala se da odluke donosimo brže nego što je to običaj u Europi, te da našu organizaciju umrežimo s drugima kako bismo ukazali na važnost očnog bankarstva u oftalmološkom svijetu. Promovirala sam spoj znanstvenog i kliničkog rada unutar udruge koja je nekad bila podijeljena na 'liječnike praktičare' i 'znanstvenike', a oni zapravo trebaju disati i raditi skupa za bo-

without unnecessary discussions, and am used to working long hours. Before becoming president, I was on the EEBA Administrative Council, where I always tried to speed things up, to connect our association with other eye health-related organizations with goal of promoting the importance of eye banks in the world of ophthalmology. I worked on promoting the idea of combining scientific and practical work within the association, which has since its foundation been divided between scientifically-oriented doctors and practitioners, who in reality should be working together closely, to be able to better tend to patients. I guess my approach appealed to many in the EEBA, so they selected me for the position twice.

You have a good idea of how well equipped eye clinics are abroad and in Croatia. Is there anything your foreign colleagues envy you for, or anything they have that makes you want to trade places with them?

The very first reaction we inevitably notice when foreign colleagues visit Svjetlost is shock. They can barely believe they are in Croatia, as they all seem to believe clinics on this high level only exist in western Europe, for example, Germany, or the USA. Our equipment and our medical staff really are on an exceptionally high level. I



ljitak pacijenata. Taj se pristup mnogima u EEBA-i svidio te su me valjda zato dvaput birali za predsjednicu.

**Imate dobar uvid u stručnost i opremljenost očnih klinika u inozemstvu i kod nas. Na čemu vam zavide strani kolege, a u čemu biste se mijenjali s njima?**

Strani kolege kada dođu u Klinikum Svjetlost prvo ne mogu vjerovati da su u Hrvatskoj. Postoji uvjerenje da ovakva kvaliteta Klinike pripada samo bogatom Zapadu, tipa Njemačke ili Amerike. I ne varaju se! Jer mi imamo najmoderniju opremu i visokoobrazovani kadar kakav se rijetko sreće u svijetu. Mislim da nam zavide na brzini kojom uvodimo nove metode operacija i liječenja u svakodnevnu kliničku praksu, a pritom smo još i obrazovna ustanova koja provodi znanstveni rad. Rijetka je to kombinacija. Nema baš puno toga gdje bih se mijenjala sa stranim kolegama, osim možda u odnosu društva prema privatnicima, jer kao zemlja proklamiramo privatno vlasništvo, ali nam još uvijek brojni ljudi iz državnih službi nisu skloni. Primjerice, nisam mogla prijaviti svoj znanstveni projekt u Hrvatskoj jer radim u privatnoj ustanovi, iako smo registrirana znanstvena ustanova. To mi se u nekoj drugoj zemlji Europe ili u Americi ne bi moglo dogoditi. **Usavršavali ste se u inozemstvu. Jeste li poželjeli ostati raditi vani?**

U mladosti sam bila sigurna da ću živjeti negdje na zapadu. No, nakon duljeg samostalnog boravka u inozemstvu - godinu dana u Parizu, godinu u Bostonu i po nekoliko mjeseci u Njemačkoj i Nizozemskoj - shvatila sam da u biti čovjek ima samo jedan dom, a to je tamo gdje su ti obitelj i prijatelji. Poslovno, vidjela sam više izazova za povratak u Hrvatsku, da pacijentima prenesem znanja stečena vani, te da probam unaprijediti naš zdravstveni sustav. Vani sam bila samo jedan mali kotačić u već dobro razvijenom zdravstvenom i znanstvenom svijetu; pravo zadovoljstvo ipak je unaprijediti to u našoj zemlji. I nisam požalila zbog odluke o povratku!

**Kakav ste mentor mladim kolegama i možete li ih svojim vodstvom motivirati da ostanu u Hrvatskoj?**

Trudim se motivirati ih da se, osim strukom, bave i znanosti. Tako su brojni mladi kolege, uz specijalizaciju oftalmologije, sa mnom izradili i doktorat znanosti. Inače, to mi je jedan od najdražih dijelova posla, jer kada sam s mladima od sebe, zavaravam se da se i sama pomladujem. Posebno sam ponosna na njih jer im je puno teže izraditi dobar znanstveni rad nego mladim liječnicima u inozemstvu. Gdje bismo stigli kada bi svi mladi samo otišli.

**U Svjetlosti radi puno liječnica. Možemo li to tumačiti da vlasnik klinike prof. Nikica Gabrić ima više povjerenja u žene ili u medicini postoje 'ženske' specijalizacije?**

Ne mislim da prof. Gabrić ima više povjerenja u žene, niti vjerujem u tezu da u životu možeš gajiti više povjerenja u određeni spol. Ljudske karakteristike važne za naš posao kao što su znanje, radišnost, manualna spretnost, dobar odnos prema bolesniku te sposobnost za timski rad, jednako su raspoređene među ženama i muškarcima. Međutim, značajno raste broj žena koje završavaju medicinski fakultet, pa tako pri zapošljavanju novih liječnika, osobu s karakteristikama koje sam spomenula lakše nademo među ženama.

think they also envy the pace at which we introduce new procedures and methods into everyday practice, and the fact that we are a university clinic working on scientific research. That is indeed rare. As far as trading places with any of them, I don't think I have anything to wish for, except for maybe the way society in general treats them and values their work. For example, as a doctor working in a private clinic I was not allowed to register my scientific project, even though our clinic is registered as a research facility. That kind of discrimination would be unthinkable in other European countries or in the States.

**After completing your studies abroad, what made you return to Croatia?**

When I was younger, I was certain I would build my career abroad, maybe in Paris or the United States. But after living on my own abroad for a longer period of time - one year in Paris, one year in Boston, several months in Germany and in the Netherlands - I have realized home really is where the heart is, where your family and friends are. I also saw a greater challenge in returning to work in Croatia, using the skills I learned abroad in treating patients here, as well as trying to improve Croatian healthcare system. Abroad, I was a cog in a well-oiled machine of healthcare and scientific research, but here I can work on improving those same sectors. I have never regretted coming back!

**What are you like as a mentor? Can your guidance motivate your younger colleagues to stay in Croatia?**

I do my best to motivate them to do scientific work in addition to their medical practice. Many of my younger colleagues have been inspired to add scientific degrees to their medical specialization. Mentoring is among my favorite facets of my job; working with all those young people makes me feel younger - or so I like to think. I am especially proud of them, as they have a much rougher time working on quality scientific papers than their colleagues in other countries. Let's hope they all choose to stay, because without young doctors, we'll be lost.

**You have many female colleagues in Svjetlost - does that mean the owner, Professor Nikica Gabrić, PhD, MD trusts female doctors more, or are there really specializations that appeal to women more?**

I don't think Professor Gabrić trusts female doctors more, nor do I believe that in general you can set a rule about trusting either gender more. There are certain character traits and qualities indispensable for being a doctor - being knowledgeable, hard-working, skilled with your hands, capable of team work and good bedside manners - and they are equally distributed among men and women. That said, as the number of women graduating from medical school is growing, so is the number of female doctors in clinics, as all those traits seem to more often come together in women.

**What damage will the pandemic inflict on health tourism, an important segment for both Croatia and Svjetlost Eye Clinic?**

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*‘Što više u životu znaš i naučiš, to si više svjestan koliko još toga ne znaš’*

*‘The more you learn, the more you understand how little you know’*

**Koliko će pandemija koronavirusa utjecati na domaći zdravstveni turizam, u kojemu Svjetlost prilično participira?**

Koronavirus zablokirao je zdravstveni turizam. Oko 30 posto bolesnika na operacije nam je dolazilo iz inozemstva. No nisam pesimistična, ako cijela situacija ne potraje predugo, svi naši potencijalni klijenti će se vratiti nakon krize. Trebat će samo raditi znatno više da nadoknadimo izgubljeno, no na to smo svi spremni.

**Kako izgleda vaša svakodnevica izvan klinike, što vas najbolje opušta?**

Briga za dom i obitelj, po tome se ne razlikujem od drugih žena. Srećom, živim u kući s vrtom pa imam svoju malu oazu usred Zagreba. Opušta me druženje s prijateljima koje imam još od srednje škole, puno tišine, obitelj i priroda oko mene. Za odmor biram naše prelijepo more - otok Vis ili planine Gorskog kotara i Austrije. Treba mi pokoja dobra knjiga, i tenisice ili planinarske cipele za obilaženje prirode. Daleka putovanja više nisu moj prvi izbor, to sam obožavala kad sam bila mlada, sada su mi naša Hrvatska i Europa dovoljne. Možda ponovno odem u Japan, tamo mi se stvarno sviđelo. **Tko kontrolira vaš vid. Kome biste povjerali da vam operacijski skine dioptrije?**

Vid rijetko kontroliram i tada to učini netko od mojih kolega s Odjela za rožnicu, nikoga ne preferiram. Dioptriju nemam, te je za sada još ne trebam skidati, a kada dođe vrijeme, voljela bih da to učini netko od mojih učenika. Jer pravi je mentor i profesor onaj koji iza sebe ostavi barem jednog mladog kolegu koji struku poznaje bolje od svog učitelja.

The corona virus has temporarily stopped all health tourism. Usually, around 30 percent of our patients are foreigners. Still, I am not a pessimist and believe that should the crisis be resolved soon, all our potential clients will come back. We will have to be ready to work much more to compensate for losses, but I have no doubt we will be.

**What does your life look like outside work? What relaxing hobbies do you most enjoy?**

My home and my family, like any other woman. I am lucky to live in a house with a garden, a little oasis in downtown Zagreb. I find joy in spending time with friends, some of whom I have known since high school; in spending time with my family, in quiet and nature. I spend vacations on our beautiful Adriatic, on the isle of Vis or in Gorski Kotar, or in Austria. All I need are a few good books, a pair of sneakers and a pair of hiking shoes to wander around and that's all. Faraway holidays are no longer my first choice, even though they were when I was younger. These days I prefer Croatia and Europe. Still, I might go back to visit Japan, a country I liked a lot.

**Who is your eye doctor? Who would you trust to correct your eyesight?**

I rarely go for check-ups and when I do, it's usually to any of my colleagues at the cornea department. I have no favorites. I still have no need for eyesight correction, but when the time comes, I'd like to be operated on by one of my students. The surest sign you have been a good mentor and good teacher is leaving behind at least one young colleague that has become better than you.

