A Tribute to Melvin Kaplan, OD, FCOVD

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We lost another brilliant and committed optometrist last month. While there have been several beautiful tributes to his career,\(^1\)\(^2\) we are particularly grateful for his work with children and adults with developmental and learning issues. Mel Kaplan understood the importance of optometric therapeutic techniques and spoke often and deeply on an approach to testing and lens treatment, particularly the use of yoked prisms in prescriptions and in vision therapy for this population. Mel was part of a generation of optometrists that studied Jerry Getman’s work and trained with Amiel Francke. He, along with Gus Forkiotis, John Streff and Robert Kraskin, understood the profound and often immediate impact that lenses and yoked prisms can have on an individual’s posture, balance, emotional state and overall function. We remember sitting in the audience at COVD conferences and at the Lens and Prism Seminars with Mel, Gus and John, working hard to understand Mel’s process, recognizing the importance of a performance approach to patients with multiple challenges. Some of us, including our colleagues Nancy Torgersen and Marci Rose, met with Mel Kaplan to discuss his techniques before writing on examinations and treatments of patients with autism.\(^3\)

It is hard to imagine now, but when we started our practices, parents would ask us if we would be willing to examine their complicated child. They all had experiences where doctors asked them to return to the office when the child “was able to be examined.” Mel Kaplan helped us change that attitude; he had an enormous impact through his books and lectures on so many practitioners who used the power of observation and yoked prism application with performance testing.

Mel told us, “Vision Management Therapy is an individualized program that measures, observes, and is designed to develop, improve, remediate, and enhance visual performance. The ultimate goal is to raise levels of performance which, in turn, affects behavior and influences how one performs in social, academic, and vocational surroundings.”\(^4\) Other clinicians using yoked prism procedures, such as Robert Kraskin, preferred a disruptive approach. Mel taught that yoked prisms might improve function such that a patient’s performance improved immediately. His technique engaged patients who were nonverbal and/or multiply challenged, improving their overall function.

Mel taught that optometrists needed to look at the patient in front of them from a functional performance approach and emphasized the importance of objective findings for all of us. “I do not view people with various disabilities as different. I look at them as having different levels of visual performance … the question is not of labels, but of levels of performance.”\(^4\)

By the early ’90’s, optometrists were becoming aware that the incidence of autism was rising and that a hallmark of the disorder was a lack of appropriate eye contact. Doctors, the therapeutic

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Keywords: Autism, delay, developmental, Kaplan, multisensory, nonverbal, prism, yoked

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community, and parents were searching for answers and some sought out optometric care. During this time period, Patty Lemer introduced the two of us to each other through the Developmental Delay Registry (DDR) which Mel contributed to regularly. His article on “Postural Orientation Modifications in Autism in Response to Ambient Lenses” resulted in an influx of patients seeking prism glasses to address visual problems and help with function. Mel continued to publish and collaborate with other professionals including Stephen Edelson and Frederic Flach. Dr. Flach was the father of Mel’s patient, Rickie, who had psychiatric issues. Dr. Flach had written earlier about the positive experiences his daughter had as a result of wearing yoked prism glasses and doing vision therapy with Mel. Mel championed that vision therapy can treat not only visual problems, but also cognitive, emotional and physical difficulties. He also published two important books on vision and autism identifying the common ASD symptoms such as hand-flapping, poor eye contact and tantrums as indicative of visual confusion and a lack of spatial awareness due to poor ambient vision. In his books, he gives guidance on how to identify the visual deficits of nonverbal children, select prism lenses that will alter the visual field, and create individually tailored programs of therapy in order to retrain the system. Mel continued to share his approach with young optometrists, hired many of us through the years, opening his clinic so interested parties could observe his performance probes. He worked hard to standardize his procedures for prescribing yoked prisms, developing the Kaplan Nonverbal Battery (KNB) for patients that could not do the standard optometric evaluation. In 2019, Stacy Coulter repeated the testing and noted in her research that “The Kaplan Nonverbal Battery is a useful test to evaluate yoked prism prescriptions for autistic children who have minimal or no speech.”

Mel Kaplan’s Nonverbal Battery included nine tasks such as ball play, video viewing, walk, sit, and seated and standing pursuits, all of which require a multisensory optometric approach. Some of the lessons and experiences we shared with Dr. Kaplan enabled us to have long and successful careers working with special needs populations. This expanded our model of vision and contributed to our work with challenging patients and helped us to develop a multisensory questionnaire for our chapter in Len Press’ updated book Applied Concepts in Vision Therapy.

Mel Kaplan gave us two important gifts: an approach to nonverbal patients, including those on the autism spectrum, and effective procedures for yoked prism treatment in these populations. Thanks to Mel’s Nonverbal Battery, we have a better understanding of the importance of a multisensory approach to vision and recognize the immediate and profound multisensory impact that yoked prisms can have on all of our patients.

We both feel that our successes in practice particularly with those on the autism spectrum and those that are multiply challenged, is due in part to our studies with Mel Kaplan, among others. Some of the words expressed in social media and in other tributes attest to the far reach of the influence Mel had in pioneering the use of yoked prisms for performance testing and treatment.

He will be missed but his work lives on in so many.

REFERENCES
1. https://www.facebook.com/cvmny


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Dr. Schulman graduated cum laude from the University of Pennsylvania where she received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology. She graduated with her Doctorate in Optometry and Masters in Vision Science degrees from the State University of New York, College of Optometry. Dr. Schulman received her Fellowship in the College of Optometrists for Vision Development and is an Associate member of the Optometric Extension Program, in addition to being an Adjunct Professor at the State University of New York College of Optometry.

Dr. Schulman has lectured extensively on behavioral optometry topics such as vision in the classroom, vision and aging, visual difficulties in the developmentally delayed, and lectured and published on vision and autism. She specializes in behavioral optometry and vision therapy, pediatrics, learning disabilities and preventative, integrative and alternative vision care for all ages.

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Dr. Celia Hinrichs has worked with children and adults with multiple issues, complicated strabismic patients, and head trauma patients for over forty years. She has taught at New England College of Optometry’s Specialty Clinic and in the classroom, managed a private practice in optometric vision rehabilitation, and held both teaching and staff optometry positions at the Perkins Low Vision Clinic and New England Center for Autism. For more than twenty years, she developed her own practice where she did optometric vision therapy every day. She continues to develop approaches to allow individuals in these special populations to use their visual skills more effectively in daily living and education.