

*Patrick Aiello, M.D.,  
a board certified  
ophthalmologist,  
is surrounded by  
eyewear in the newly  
added optical shop at  
Aiello Eye Institute.*



# Ten Minutes with... Dr. Patrick Aiello

Text by Nancy Gilkey

Photography by Jared Dort

Col. Patrick Aiello is a flight surgeon who listens to Bob Marley while he runs with his Doberman pinschers, Holly and Hannah. And he's got a clinic brimming with state-of-the-art ophthalmology technology.

That's because the senior medical officer for the Arizona Air National Guard is also a board-certified ophthalmologist, as well as a board-certified medical internist.

He and his wife Marlene recently moved to Yuma and opened the Aiello Eye Institute in the Foothills, where they provide standard and specialized ophthalmology services.

Recently, as Marlene, who is also the office manager and a registered nurse, worked with staff to process incoming patients and stock the practice's newly added optical shop, Dr. Aiello sat down to chat with Health Connections about his various roles as a local doctor who advises some of Washington's top brass.

## **HC: You're a colonel?**

Yes. In the Air National Guard, which is a reserve component of the Air Force .... The National Guard is basically the direct descendent of the old time militia, the Continental Army and all that stuff. So that's what I am, air militia. Sounds cool, huh?

I wear several hats in the Air National Guard. You've got a primary one, a secondary one and so on. It depends on, to some extent, your qualifications. My current position is, I'm what's called a state air surgeon, so I'm the senior medical officer for the Arizona Air National Guard.

So in that role, I advise our air commander - that's General Colangelo, our adjutant general - and I advise the medical group commanders and also the unit commanders on any medical affairs. I also interact with our headquarters in Washington.

And I have a couple of other administrative roles. For instance, if there's somebody who needs what's called a waiver, if they've got a medical issue and they have to find out if they can continue on duty or not, those have to come through me. If there's somebody who's trying to become a pilot or some other special duty ... (or) somebody who wants to enter or be commissioned as an officer, then I have to approve those physicals.

## **HC: As an ophthalmologist, what's your basic routine - in a nutshell?**

In the office here, we take care of medical and surgical ophthalmology. For instance, if someone had an eye infection or diabetes, and they needed to be checked, then this would be the place for them to come.

As far as surgery goes, if someone has a cataract and needs that taken care of, or some other eye condition, or if they wanted to do something like lasik, refractive surgery, we do that kind of stuff. So that's a lot of different things. I'd say on an average surgery day, I might do three, four, or five different types of surgeries. I do surgery every Monday and every other Wednesday right now.

## **HC: What's your favorite way to decompress?**

I try to get up early every day and take our dogs out for a run. And believe it or not, that's not so much decompressing, but it is a real stress reliever. Besides, I feel guilty if I don't - those looks (from the dogs) like, "Oh no! You're not taking me?" I can't stand that.

We have, on occasion, brought them to the office. But usually we try to be sensitive to the fact that a lot of people might be scared. But if we've had work going on at the house and they just can't be there, we've brought them in, and they're pretty personable.



*Dr. Aiello uses a phoropter to measure patient Jerry Vaughn's eyes for a prescription.*

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**HC: What should people know about you?**

I guess the message I'd like people to have, as far as my medical practice, is that I'm going to give them the best services possible. They're going to get world class, first class services here. That's my mission, to do that. And I'm going to listen to them, and I'm going to communicate with them to find out what they need.

You know how a lot of people just don't listen to you? I just don't want to do that. I think everyone tends to do it, even without knowing it, you know. You get busy, you get focused on what you're doing, and you stop listening. I've tried to mitigate that. I've tried to not do that.

Additionally, I've tried to set some mechanisms in place to encourage communication. For example, we've got a number of systems like (the video monitor in the lobby) playing educational information. We've got educational information available all over the place.

We've got our medical records system, and we're constantly trying to educate people on what's going on. We've got a Web site, and that's got a lot of links to educational stuff. We've got a thing whereby if people do email, we send them emails and attach educational brochures. So I think that's what it's really all about, and people can't get enough of it. I guess I'm the same way; I want to know what's going on.

**HC: What's your latest interest?**

I've liked gardening and not really done much, but since we've moved here into town ... we're putting in plants and so on, so the landscape and the gardening is the latest interest. And it's fun. I'm learning about all these different plants.

**HC: What's the most recent book you've read?**

Well, I'm reading one right now. I think it's called "High Survival." I picked it up at Border's this weekend, and it is a story of how people get into extreme situations and why some people survive and why some don't.

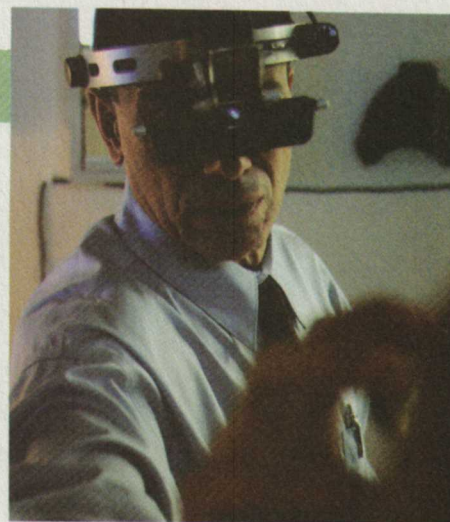
**HC: What kinds of songs do you have on your iPod?**

Mostly classic rock kind of stuff although I do have a lot of so-called alternative, like Amy Winehouse is one of my favorites. Bob Marley - some of the stuff you can get into listening to while you run.

**HC: What words do you live by?**

I know it sounds kind of corny, but one of the things they drill into you in the military, at least in the Air Force, and every service has it's own version of this, but the Air Force core values are integrity first,

*Dr. Aiello views a patient's retina through the indirect ophthalmoscope he's wearing and a specialized lens held at the patient's eye.*



service before self, and I paraphrase the last one: do the right thing.

**HC: What is the most daring thing you've ever done?**

We're taking flying lessons, my wife and I. Even though I've been a flight surgeon for years and years and years, I've never gotten my pilot's license. I think that's pretty daring. A lot of people are scared of that.

You're in a small plane by yourself for the first time, the engine's running fairly loud and for the first time, you're there on the runway. I've been in lots of aircraft, hundreds, thousands of flights, but usually you're in these big jets, four engines, they've got a full crew, and they've been doing this a long time. They do it in their sleep.

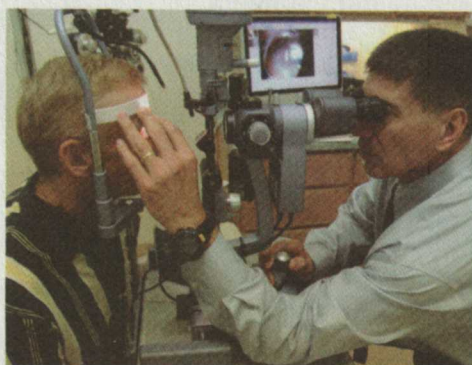
But for the first time, it's me, and no one else but me. And I'm talking to the tower, and I'm preparing to take the controls and take off - you know, escape the bonds of earthly gravity. And then the tower says OK for takeoff, and then you rev the engine up, roll down the runway, and off you go. And then you're in the air.

It's exhilarating, but you can't give in to that. You've got to stay focused. And that's a good feeling, being focused, being in control. That's good enough; I'm not in it for the "woo hoo!"

The most stressful time of any flight typically is the landing. That's the part where it all has to come together, and you have to do everything according to checklist and according to procedures. I mean of course takeoff is a critical phase, but I think most pilots agree that the landing is the most difficult, technically. Anyway, I think that was the time my anxiety was the highest. Thank goodness I made a pretty good landing on my first solo flight!

*Aiello Eye Institute is located at 11551 S. Fortuna Road, Suite E, and the number is 782-1980. ▲*

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*Dr. Aiello views patient Jerry Vaughn's retina and optic nerve through a slit lamp and a condensing lens, the later of which is held at the patient's eye.*