Gift of **SIGHT**

March 2026 NEWSLETTER

Dear friends and supporters,

I would like to pay my respects to all those who passed away during the last year, leaving a legacy to Gift of Sight, and to the many friends and relatives who very kindly donated gifts in memory of their loved ones. Many were patients, diagnosed with blinding eye conditions, who wished to help with the development of treatments for future generations. Their generosity will make a huge difference to the way we are able to continue supporting our scientists. We have listed their names overleaf and, subject to permission, also on the memory page of our website.

Thanks to an exceptionally thoughtful legacy gift, we are now able to recruit an additional technician for our laboratories. The specialist skills required to maintain healthy cell cultures and support our researchers are invaluable. While this type of post is sometimes funded through large grant applications, we are entering a phase of developing future treatments in which a growing number of cells will need dedicated, expert care. The new team member will also play a crucial role in ensuring cells are regularly 'fed'- a responsibility that continues across weekends and bank holidays.

I am also thrilled to share the news of a very generous donation made through the University's Medical Innovation Fund by Dame Mary Perkins, co-founder of Specsavers. This gift will support the study of my PhD student Dr Maria Patsiamanidi, an NHS colleague who has also been working in Southampton's NIHR Clinical Trials Unit.

Photo: Professor Andrew Lotery, Dr Maria Patsiamanidi and Dame Mary Perkins

Maria's project will enhance our knowledge of age-related macular degeneration (AMD), the most common cause of blindness among older people in the UK. Currently affecting around 700,000 people, this number will continue to grow with an ageing population. It remains difficult to predict how an individual's AMD will progress, which makes early intervention impossible. Using artificial intelligence and machine learning, Maria will analyse thousands of retinal images collected as part of the PINNACLE study to better understand how AMD moves from its early stages to the late, sight-threatening stage. This could pave the way for a predictive model that identifies which patients are at greatest risk of their condition worsening, enabling earlier and more personalised treatment.

This is a very exciting start to 2026. Updates are given overleaf from some of our younger scientists who have been helped by your generosity, and I hope you are as delighted as I am to read them. Thank you again for all your support.

With my warmest regards.

Andrew Lotery

Andrew Lotery MD, FRCOphth
Professor of Ophthalmology
University of Southampton

MEMORY DONATIONS 2025/2026

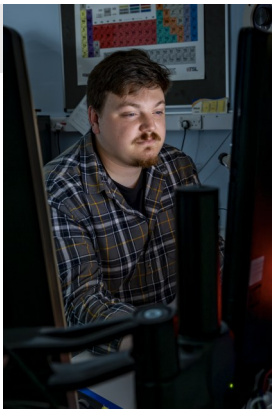
We would like to thank everyone who has helped our research through gifts in wills and donations in memory of friends and family who are no longer with us. We fondly remember:

Mary Bennett · Jean Butcher · Joyce Ellis
Richard Lawes · Rosemary Lehmann · Jessie Lott · Sheila McGrath
Lesley Packham · Bernadine Rouse · Jean Ruthford
Ian Skeet · Grace Smith · Joan Steggall

Dr Maria Patsiamanidi

Maria, who has been a part of our clinical team in Southampton Eye Unit for two years, is thrilled to have started a PhD with the vision research team. She says "I am incredibly grateful for the funding I've received, which allows me to fully dedicate myself to this work, access the best tools and resources, and collaborate with leading experts in the field. This support is not just enabling my research, it is helping me pursue a goal of turning cutting-edge AI into practical solutions that could improve vision and quality of life for millions worldwide. I look forward to sharing the results of my findings in due course."

Charlie Ellis, PhD student



I have been working on my doctoral studies in Dr Arjuna Ratnayaka's group since October 2022. My project investigates an important part of our cells' waste-disposal machinery called lysosomes.

Lysosomes are small structures that break down and recycle waste, playing a vital role in maintaining a cell's ability to function normally. As we get older, lysosomes become less efficient, leading to waste building up in these structures. This build-up contributes to major diseases in the retina and brain, such as AMD, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease.

My work has detailed how lysosomes function so that we can better understand their biology at a molecular level. Over the past three years, I have developed new ways to identify how lysosomes respond to different types of cellular waste. Additionally, my studies have investigated the size, behaviour and position of lysosomes inside cells, as changes to these have major implications for lysosomal activity. I have also identified and am currently investigating important genes and proteins that are linked with neurodegenerative diseases and lysosomal damage. Together, this information has helped us understand how lysosomes behave as we age.

With support from Gift of Sight, I had the opportunity to present these discoveries at the world's largest eye conference in Salt Lake City, Utah (USA) in 2025. Molecular insights of this kind are essential for developing meaningful new treatments for blinding diseases such as AMD and neurodegenerative diseases. I am very grateful to the BBSRC South Coast Biosciences Doctoral Training Partnership (SoCoBio-DTP), the University of Southampton's Institute for Life Sciences (IfLS) and the Gift of Sight Appeal and their donors for their continued support of my development as a vision scientist.

Stephanie Turner, PhD student

My name is Steph Turner and I am a final year PhD student working with Dr Arjuna Ratnayaka. I am passionate about understanding how blinding diseases develop in the retina. Before beginning my PhD, I completed a Master's degree in Genetic Manipulation and Molecular Cell Biology at the University of Sussex and worked in industry using genome editing approaches for drug discovery. I also contributed to research using a Parkinson's disease cell model to screen compounds for neuroprotection. These experiences continue to shape and strengthen my approach to developing robust and translational research models.

My PhD project focuses on Stargardt disease - the most common inherited macular degeneration affecting children and young people. This condition is caused by mutations in a gene called ABCA4 that leads to the progressive loss of central vision. Currently, there are no effective treatments for this blinding condition.

Since my last update, I have successfully completed my PhD transfer, confirming the direction and feasibility of my research project. I also took a year out on maternity leave after welcoming my baby - a very special and transformative time. Returning to the lab has been both exciting and motivating, and I am proud to have progressed my research significantly since then.

Over the past year, I have developed and refined a retinal pigment epithelium (RPE) cell model to better understand Stargardt pathology. RPE cells are essential for looking after the health of photoreceptors - the light-sensing cells of the retina that allow us to see. When ABCA4 is faulty, as in the case of Stargardt patients, it leads to toxic by-products collecting in the RPE cells and contributing to their eventual death. My studies are uncovering new ways to prevent this damage, so normal vision can be prolonged in Stargardt patients.

I would like to sincerely thank everyone who contributes to and supports the Gift of Sight Appeal. Your generosity, alongside funding from the Gerald Kerkut Charitable Trust, directly funds my studies which makes this work possible.

I look forward to sharing further progress as the project advances.

Wessex Regional Ophthalmology Audit Day, 28th January 2026

Congratulations to Dr Borna Assarian, winner of this year's Gift of Sight Clinical Award at the Wessex Regional Ophthalmology Audit Day. UK hospitals are facing a significant shortage of corneal eye tissue, making Borna's work both timely and essential. His presentation explored ways to increase eye donation potential at a large UK general hospital (Southampton), and he impressed the judges with his determination and passion for driving change in this vital area of ophthalmology.

Borna received the Gift of Sight Shield from Professor Andrew Lotery, along with funding to support the costs of presenting his work at a prestigious eye research conference. He is currently combining clinical practice and research within the corneal team at University Hospital Southampton, under the supervision of Professor Parwez Hossain.

"I'm very grateful for this recognition and I thank all of those who have helped with this project", Borna said. "Improving eye donation rates can significantly improve patient outcomes for those waiting to have their sight restored."

OUR THANKS...

Thank you to **Jon Newman and Andy Hayman** for arranging a phenomenal fundraising concert at St Paul's Church, Winchester on 1st February 2026. We were treated to spectacular soloists and musicians performing three Bach cantatas featuring historic horns in the orchestra, along with beautiful renditions of *Air on the G String* and *Der Gerechte.* Thank you to everyone who joined us and supported Gift of Sight at the event.

Thank you also to the **Foresters Friendly Court 2201 (Merdon),** who kindly presented a £300 cheque at a joint social lunch meeting in January. The photo shows Chief Ranger Jane White and Secretary Morag Kirby with Ailsa Walter.

And a final thank you to everyone who donated in honour of **Professor Lotery's 'Big Birthday'** in December. He was very touched by your kindness and generosity and greatly enjoyed his celebrations with friends and family.

UPCOMING EVENTS IN 2026: Full details at www.giftofsight.org.uk/events

Saturday 9th May: Albinism Fellowship Fun Day, Pavilion on the Park, Eastleigh, 1:30-5:30pm. Enjoy a talk from Paralympian Adam Knott, a Q&A with Drs Jay Self and Helena Lee, soft play, slime making, crafts, and a sensory tent - plus a visit from a mobile farm! **Tickets: £10 per family (up to 6 people) or £5 for two people.** www.albinism.org.uk/events.

Thursday 11th June: Little Court Garden Party, Crawley, SO21 2PU, 6:30-8:30pm. Join us for fizz and canapés in the delightful garden of Little Court, courtesy of Mrs Patricia Elkington. You'll have the opportunity to mingle with members of the vision research team, take part in a raffle, and hear a short talk from Professor Andrew Lotery. **Tickets are £20 per person and can be booked in advance here:** give.giftofsight.org.uk/littlecourt**.**

Can you help? If you know a local business that might like to support our events - through sponsorship or by donating a raffle prize, we'd love to hear from you. We're always grateful for your introductions!

Baby Gracie's parents have been organising an amazing series of activities throughout March and April in the Liverpool area to raise funds for both Gift of Sight and the Albinism Fellowship - from darts and football tournaments to mountain climbs! Visit: www.gofundme.com/albinism-little-gracie.

Michael Hiden is also taking on an incredible challenge: running 4 miles every 4 hours for 48 hours on Friday 15th May. He is aiming to raise £4,818, a figure that represents the 48 miles he'll run and the 18 eye procedures his partner has undergone so far: www.justgiving.com/page/michael-hiden-runs.

Want to take on your own challenge? Gift of Sight is now a Listed Charity on the Ultra Challenge Series. With 20 exciting events to choose from and distances ranging from 10km up to 100km, there may be an Ultra Challenge for you: www.ultrachallenge.com/events-calendar/listed-charity.

Contact: Ailsa Walter | T: 023 8059 9073 or Jennie Mugridge | T: 023 8059 5921
Email: info@giftofsight.org.uk Website: www.giftofsight.org.uk

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Online: visit **give.giftofsight.org.uk or** use your smartphone to **scan the QR code**:
By phone: call us on **023 8059 2747**
By cheque: please post to **Gift of Sight, Office of Development & Alumni Relations Building 37, Highfield, Southampton, SO17 1BJ**

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