

# Department of Medicine Inclusion Council Celebrates Black History Month Honoring Black Physicians



## Patricia Era Bath, MD

**Ophthalmologist**

*Inventor, laser scientist, a humanitarian and academic*

The Department of Medicine Inclusion Council honors and celebrates the life and accomplishments of Patricia Era Bath, MD, (November 4, 1942 - May 30, 2019). Dr. Bath may be best known for her invention called Laserphaco Probe a device and technique for cataract surgery. She also became the first woman member of the Jules Stein Eye Institute. Bath was the first African-American woman doctor to receive a patent for a medical purpose. A holder of five patents, she also founded the non-profit American Institute for the Prevention of Blindness in Washington, D.C.



She received her medical degree from Howard University College of Medicine in Washington, D.C., interned at Harlem Hospital from 1968 to 1969, and completed a fellowship in ophthalmology at Columbia University from 1969 to 1970. Patricia Bath was the first African American to complete an ophthalmology residency with New York University's School of Medicine, in 1973. Two years later, the UCLA School of Medicine appointed her as the first female faculty member in its department of ophthalmology. Believing that "eyesight is a basic human right," Dr. Bath went on to co-found the American Institute for the Prevention of Blindness in 1977, an organization whose mission is to protect, preserve, and restore the gift of sight.

Interning in New York City in the 1960s sparked a revelation for Patricia Era Bath, MD. Bath, noticing that rates of blindness and visual impairment were much higher at the Harlem Hospital's eye clinic, which served many Black patients, than at the eye clinic at Columbia University, which mostly served whites. That observation spurred her to conduct a study that found twice the rate of blindness among African-Americans compared with whites. Throughout the rest of her career, Bath explored inequities in vision care. She created the discipline of community ophthalmology, which approaches vision care from the perspectives of community medicine and public health.



Bath in her home office, 1994.

In the early 1980s, Bath studied laser technology and saw its potential for eye surgery. In 1986, she invented the Laserphaco probe, a device and method for cataract treatments. When she patented the instrument, in 1988, she became the first African American female doctor to receive a patent for a medical invention.

By 1983 she was chair of the ophthalmology residency training program at Drew-UCLA, the first woman in the US to hold such a position. In 1993, Bath retired from UCLA Medical Center and was appointed to the honorary medical staff. After that, she advocated for telemedicine, to provide medical services to remote areas.

Dr. Bath was also recognized for her philanthropic work in the field of ophthalmology by President Barack Obama. In 2009, she was put on his commission for digital accessibility to blind children.

Dr. Bath's greatest passion, however, continued to be fighting blindness until her death. Her "personal best moment" occurred on a humanitarian mission to North Africa, when she restored the sight of a woman who had been blind for thirty years by implanting a keratoprosthesis. "The ability to restore sight is the ultimate reward," she said.

