



Melissa Cicarelli | *COE MEMBER SPOTLIGHT*

Dell Laser, TX

25 years in ophthalmology

Tell us about yourself and your current role:

I currently serve as a Practice Administrator of Dell Laser Consultants. We're a premium cataract and refractive surgery practice in Austin, Texas. I stepped into this role with a strong clinical and administrative foundation, and today my work is a blend of hands-on clinic involvement and operational oversight.

What I enjoy most is the balance. I genuinely love working with patients and staying connected to the clinical side, but I'm equally passionate about the strategic management of the practice, building systems, improving performance, and helping the organization grow.

I've been married for 20 years and have two kids. One is in college, and the other is in high school, which keeps life busy outside of work as well.

What drew you to the specialty and the pathway to your role?

I didn't set out with a long-term plan to work in ophthalmology, but it's a field I've truly grown to love. I actually started my journey in education. I was a junior high teacher for three years before I realized junior high was rough enough the first time around.

From there, I transitioned into ophthalmology, initially drawn to the patient interaction and the hands-on clinical environment. As I gained experience, I became more interested in how the practice actually runs behind the scenes. How workflows are built, how teams function, and how decisions impact both patient care and the business. I naturally started taking on more responsibility, and over time, that evolved into leadership opportunities.

My pathway to Practice Administrator wasn't a single step; it was a progression. Learning the clinical side first, then expanding into operations, and eventually stepping into a role where I could influence both. That combination of patient care and strategic management is what's kept me in ophthalmology for 25 years.

What inspired you to pursue the COE certification?

Pursuing the COE was really about taking the next step from experience to intentional leadership. I had spent years learning on the job, growing through different roles and responsibilities, but I reached a point where I wanted to formalize that knowledge and make sure I was leading with purpose, not just instinct.

The certification gave me a structured way to deepen my understanding of the business side of ophthalmology, finance, operations, and compliance, and just as importantly, it helped me build credibility with my physicians and my team. It signaled that I was invested not only in my own growth, but in leading the practice at a higher level.

How did you prepare for the exam or training process (study methods, resources, mentors)?

I used the COE flash cards to stay consistent with key concepts, and I spent time watching webinars from the ASOA library to reinforce and expand on those topics.

I also worked through several of the books from the recommended COE resource list, which helped deepen my understanding of the business and operational side of ophthalmology. Just as importantly, I leaned heavily on my daily experience, connecting what I was studying to what I was actively doing in the practice.

I even asked our accountant to review financial principles with me to make sure my understanding was solid, which was incredibly helpful. That combination of structured resources, real-world application, and a willingness to ask for support made a big difference in how confident I felt going into the exam.

What was the most challenging part of preparing for the exam?

The most challenging part was the financial component. Even with hands-on experience, it's different when you're expected to fully understand and apply the concepts in a structured way for an exam.

I had to be very intentional about slowing down and really learning the "why" behind the numbers. Not just what we do in the practice, but how to interpret financial statements, understand ratios, and think more strategically about performance. That's actually why I asked our accountant to spend time reviewing those principles with me.

Balancing studying with a full-time role was also a challenge, so it required consistency more than anything. Making time regularly instead of trying to do it all at once.

Is this the year you obtain your COE? Visit <https://www.asoa.org/career-and-advancement/certified-ophthalmic-executive> for more information and to get started!

What advice would you offer to those considering sitting for the exam?

Treat it as more than an exam. This is an opportunity to become a more intentional leader.

Use multiple resources. The COE flash cards, ASOA webinars, and the recommended reading list all reinforce each other. Don't rely on just one. Tie everything back to your daily work. The more you connect concepts to real situations in your practice, the easier it is to understand and retain.

Don't avoid your weak areas. For many people, that's finance. Spend the extra time there, and don't hesitate to ask for help. Stay consistent. It's much more effective to study a little at a time than to try to cram. Lean into the community. ASOA is here for you! Talk to others who have gone through it. Those conversations are incredibly valuable and remind you that you're not doing this alone.

How has achieving this certification impacted your professional development?

Earning the COE really changed how I show up as a leader. It gave me more confidence in my decision-making, especially on the business side, and strengthened my credibility with both our physicians and our team. There's a different level of trust when they know you've invested in developing that expertise.

It also pushed me to keep growing. That momentum led me to continue my education and ultimately earn my Master's degree.

In what ways will this certification benefit your team, patients/clients, or the organization?

The biggest benefit is that it makes me a more effective, intentional leader for the entire organization.

For our team, it means clearer structure, better communication, and more thoughtful decision-making. I'm able to build stronger systems, set more meaningful KPIs, and create an environment where people understand expectations and have the support to succeed.

For our patients, it translates into a better overall experience. When operations are efficient and the team is aligned, patients feel it through smoother workflows, better communication, and more consistent care.

For the organization, it strengthens both performance and sustainability. The COE credential means that decisions are grounded in best practices, whether it's financial management, compliance, or strategic growth.

Ultimately, it allows me to connect the clinical, operational, and business sides of the practice in a way that supports long-term success.

What motivates you to continue pursuing learning and professional development?

I'm motivated by a combination of responsibility and curiosity.

In my role, the decisions I make directly impact our team, our physicians, and our patients. That responsibility pushes me to keep learning so I can lead well and make informed, thoughtful decisions. Healthcare is constantly evolving. Whether it's technology, compliance, or patient expectations. I don't think you can lead effectively if you're not continuing to grow.

I'm also naturally curious. I enjoy understanding how things work and how they can work better. Whether that's improving a workflow, strengthening financial performance, or enhancing the patient experience.

And honestly, being connected to organizations like ASOA keeps that momentum going. Being surrounded by other practice leaders challenges me to keep raising the bar and contributing at a higher level.

How did you celebrate after earning your certification?

Tacos and margaritas! I'm a true Texan!

Who supported or inspired you most along this journey?

My kids. They've been my biggest source of motivation and support throughout my entire career journey. I want to show them what it looks like to set a goal, stay committed, and keep growing. No matter how busy life gets.

Outside of work and professional learning, what do you enjoy doing in your free time?

Outside of work, I love spending time hiking, reading, and traveling, but most of all just being with my family. Those are the things that help me recharge and stay grounded.

What is next on your professional development journey?

Currently working on my PhD, stay tuned!