

# Lasik patients lured by pitch, prices

## Risks of surgery not always openly discussed

By Brett Shipp/WFAA-TV

*It's important to note that millions of Lasik patients have said they are pleased with their surgeries, which leave them seeing without glasses or contacts for the first time in years.*

*But how many of those patients went through with the procedure without being fully informed of the risks? And, how many of those patients were lured solely by slick presentations and price?*

Fort Worth-based Alcon Surgical Company has discontinued its old line of Lasik devices after reports of a defect - a surgical instrument allegedly responsible for serious eye injuries to at least four patients.

The patients' horror stories, meanwhile, are rarely shared with prospective Lasik patients. Some suggest the doctors involved can't see beyond the dollar signs.

The Lasik Vision Institute, a nationwide chain, claims to have performed more Lasik surgeries last year than any place in the country. The chain's marketing strategy is upbeat and aggressive, and its pricing is among the lowest in the country - in some cases, \$299 per eye.

It's an image being portrayed by a growing number of Lasik surgeons in North Texas: Celebrity endorsements, bargain prices and easy payment plans.

Dr. Henry Gelender is considered a top corneal transplant specialist who also performs about ten Lasik procedures a week. He worries that doctors performing 30 to 40 procedures a week may be increasing the risk of accidents or improper care.

"It's done a lot to popularize the procedure, but it's also done a disservice in that it trivializes the procedure," Gelender said. "Too many patients are being herded through a doctor's office, and you just can't take care of that many patients without mistakes happening."

Dallas attorney Kay Van Wey represents one Lasik patient who said she is now blind in one eye.

"The emphasis has become so heavy on marketing the surgery - and getting these patients in the door - that patients aren't being told that there can be very serious complications associated with this," Van Wey said.

Patients are often attracted through open enrollment seminars where doctors explain the ease of Lasik surgery.

As one speaker at a seminar said, "I know everybody's probably thinking, 'what am I feeling right here?'" You actually don't feel anything at all."

While there may be some discussion of risks during the presentation, tough questions about possible side effects can be downplayed or dismissed.

"You are not seeing the halos or that kind of the glaring, that type of stuff in any of your patients? No and I tell you what if I did, I'd tell you."

Martha Chaffee of Santa Fe said she attended one such seminar, and bought into a sales pitch which didn't include the known risks. She said she was never told a blade would be used to cut a flap in her cornea, and she said that blade missed its mark.

## Lasik patients lured by pitch, prices, continued

“The pain was unreal, and my eyes were watering,” Chaffee said. “I went in the next day and they said, ‘How do you feel?’ I said ‘not good’ - and that’s when he looked in and saw that the flap had come up.”

Now, after three surgeries, Chaffee said her vision in one eye is ruined - as is her trust in the Santa Fe doctor who lured her with a bargain price.

“When you see the \$299 an eye is there a red flag that goes off? I do have some concerns as to the type of surgery that’s being offered and the way it may be done.”

Dallas ophthalmologist Gary Tylock said his procedures start at nearly \$700 per eye. He requires his patient to take a quiz on the procedure. Additionally, his list of risks is seven pages long, and his presentation includes a graphic disclosure of how the corneal flap is cut.

“All utilize a metal razor blade, and may be associated with intra-operative and post-operative complications,” Tylock said.

Tylock believes he can eliminate those complications with a new bladeless instrument called Intralase, which uses a computer-calibrated laser to cut the corneal flap. But, this procedure does cost the patient more money.

“We are operating on someone’s eyes, and we want to offer them the very best care,” Tylock said. “It takes a certain amount of expense and training and technology ... to deliver that excellent care.”

Coppell optometrist Greg Gemoules specializes in treating patients who said their eyes have been damaged by Lasik. Gemoules said lack of care and improper patient screening has damaged eyes all over the world, and has advice for patients.

“If you are happy with your contacts, if you are happy with your eyeglasses, I say stick with them,” Gemoules said.

Again, it must be stressed that many local doctors are performing dozens of successful Lasik surgeries a week, and may only be charging several hundred dollars per eye. And, Lasik has been successfully performed six million times all over the globe.

But, before you have the procedure done, ask yourself these questions:

- Are you fully informed of the risks?
- Does your Lasik doctor offer thorough testing and screening?
- What is the non-advertised track record of your prospective surgeon?
- Are you looking for the best price or the best results?

Also, News 8 recommends the Web links below, which go into much greater detail about the Lasik procedure and the risks involved.

Also Online:

[Video: Brett Shipp reports](#)

[Part one of Brett’s report](#)

[Animated graphic: How Lasik works](#)

[Learning about Lasik\(From the FDA Web site\)](#)

[Surgical Eyes: Support group for those suffering from complications](#)

[News 8 Investigates archive](#)