

LIFESTYLE

Revolutionary surgery cures near-sightedness

By Angela Bianchi

It took Wally Stankov less than 20 minutes to get 20/20 vision after 25 years of depending on his heavy eyeglasses to drive, eat and play sports.

Theresa Di Marco, equally weighed down with thick prescription glasses and irritating contact lenses, traded them in for a quick operation that restored her vision to 80 per cent (20/40) of normal.

They are only two out of about 1,000 Canadians who have undergone a revolutionary eye operation called radial keratotomy (RK), a controversial surgical procedure that is now widely practised in Canada and the U.S.

"This operation is a breakthrough," says Richmond Hill eye surgeon Yari Karas, one of 10 ophthalmologists to perform the operation. "Until recently, only glasses or contact lenses were used to fight myopia. But they're not a perfect cure.

"Thick glasses decrease images by 25 per cent and contact lenses can sustain serious implications like ulcer of the cornea," he says. "RK is a valid alternative and a true cure."

More than 150,000 radial keratotomy operations have been performed in the U.S. since 1979 and nearly 1,000 in Canada in the past few years.

It's not always possible to cor-

rect myopia completely, Karas says. "Some people will still need glasses for night driving but RK surgery will make the patient less dependent on glasses or contacts."

Karas says 85 per cent of patients operated on achieve better than 20/40 vision, the legal vision requirement to drive a car in most provinces.

Harold Stein, president of the Canadian Ophthalmological Society, says the operation is a safe, effective method for treating near-sightedness but only in certain people. "Those suffering from cornea diseases or eye astigmatism don't qualify for the operation," he says.

10 to 20 minutes

Karas, who's operated on more than 50 patients in the past two years, refuses to operate on anyone under 20 years of age because their myopia hasn't yet stabilized.

The operation itself takes from 10 to 20 minutes and can be performed at the doctor's office or at a hospital properly equipped for such surgery.

Anesthetic eye drops are given to the patient, as well as the tranquillizer Valium if the patient wants it.

The surgeon makes a series of microscopic incisions on the surface of the cornea in a spoke-like pattern. The incisions, designed to reduce the front curvature of the

cornea, make it flatter. The flattening effect causes the light rays entering the eyes to focus closer to the retina, resulting in improved vision.

"The operation looks simple but it's not," Stein says. "It's like cutting into 10 wet tissue papers but you need to only cut the first 9 layers and not the 10th."

Scarring will result but the fine incisions made with a diamond-edged knife are hidden to the naked eye. The patient might experience a bit of glare for a few weeks, be sensitive to light or have their sight regress but these problems tend to stabilize in time, Karas says.

"The operation is as good as the surgeon," Karas says.

The operation is not covered by the Ontario Health Insurance Plan and, at \$1,000 to \$1,500 an eye, is one of the more expensive cosmetic eye surgeries. Equipment and special RK courses are costly, he says.

Serious complications from the surgery are rare, doctors agree, but there are risks, as in all operations. "Cases of eye infections have been reported in the U.S. and two patients have lost their eyesight but as a result of an improperly injected anesthetic needle," Karas says. "That risk is eliminated by using eye drops."



JIM RUSSELL/TORONTO STAR

Correcting sight: Richmond Hill eye surgeon Yari Karas examines patient Christine Barber's eyes. Karas is one of the few surgeons who performs a revolutionary operation called radial keratotomy.