

Editor's Note

Lasik Surgery: Seeing Red

In his 2010 best-seller, "The Big Short: Inside the Doomsday Machine," Michael Lewis examined the dysfunction that led to the housing and credit debacle of the 2000s. Lewis spoke to numerous people who saw what was coming. One of those people, Dr. Michael Burry, who is a former neurologist who founded a hedge fund, keyed on the role that incentives had in the financial collapse. When he did, he recounted something from the medical world as an example: "Even in life or death situations, doctors, nurses and patients all responded to bad incentives," a passage of the book reads. "In the 1990s, the ophthalmologists were building careers on performing cataract procedures. They'd take half an hour or less, and yet Medicare would reimburse them \$1,700 a pop. In the late 1990s, Medicare slashed reimbursement levels to around \$450 per procedure, and the incomes of the surgically minded ophthalmologists fell. Across America, ophthalmologists rediscovered an obscure and risky procedure called radial keratotomy, and there was a boom in surgery to correct small impairments of vision. The inadequately studied procedure was marketed as a cure for the suffering of contact lens wearers. 'In reality,' says Burry, 'the incentive was to maintain their high, often one- to two-million-dollar incomes, and the justification followed. The industry rushed to come up with something less dangerous than radial keratotomy, and Lasik was eventually born.'"

As you'll read in this issue's "Eye Openers: Why FDA Looks the Other Way on Safety & Severe Side Effects," Lasik surgery has grown to a \$1.3 billion industry. Despite what Food and Drug Administration says, the rate of risk to patients is unknown, yet the agency seems to be considering the industry's well-being more than the patient's.

"Patients are basically on their own. The FDA has a role here, but the FDA has failed miserably."

This assessment comes from lawyer Todd Krouner, who has handled many Lasik-related lawsuits.

"I, frankly, don't understand why the FDA is taking such a short view of Lasik complications. [B]y its own definition of a complication, [it] has to be grossly underestimating what the true complication rate is," Krouner adds.

Warnings to consumers that Krouner offers that we echo include:


- * Avoid high-volume Lasik facilities. "One of the tells, one of the warnings, that the patient wants to be sensitive to is the time that the surgeon spends with the patient." If evaluation and screening for your suitability for Lasik is conducted by an optometrist or a technician, consider walking away.

- * Get an opinion from an ophthalmologist who doesn't perform Lasik, to avoid the possibility that the surgeon has a financial stake in convincing you that you're suited to the surgery.

- * Look for Lasik surgeons who have fellowship training in cornea and external disease, which likely gives them greater sensitivity to warning signs that make Lasik surgery inappropriate.

- * Dismiss surgeries that are promoted at \$1,000 or less for both eyes. Lasik surgery averages \$2,000 per eye. The often-correct axiom "You get what you pay for" applies.

In the development of our report, our staff spoke with the person who led FDA's ophthalmological-devices unit when FDA approved the first devices to perform Lasik. He regrets believing that doctors who supplied information had patients' best interests at heart. We at Consumers Digest don't want you to have any regrets when it comes to your eyesight.



Rich Dzierwa

Editor

Consumers Digest, 520 Lake Cook Road, Suite 500, Deerfield, IL 60015, editor@consumersdigest.com

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PUBLISHER
RANDY WEBER

EDITOR
RICH DZIERWA

MANAGING EDITOR
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CONTRIBUTING EDITORS
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CATHERINE ELTON, CHRIS GIGLEY,
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LICENSING
NATIONAL SALES DIRECTOR
ALEC LILBURN
5435 HALES LANE
CARPINTERIA, CA 93013
(805) 745-1256
ALILBURN@CONSUMERSDIGEST.COM

EASTERN SALES MANAGER
LISA M. HEIM
277 N. FARVIEW AVE.
PARAMUS, NJ 07652
(201) 265-2539 • LMHEIM2@AOL.COM

FOUNDER
ARTHUR WEBER (1926-2008)

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