

## Talking point What happened to the laser eye surgery revolution, asks Victoria Lambert

Seven years ago, when I became one of the first patients to have their short sight corrected at a Lasik eye clinic run by Boots, I was thrilled at the result and wrote about it in *The Daily Telegraph*. Like anyone who has grown up short-sighted and run the gamut of National Health specs, hard and soft contact lenses, the novelty of waking up and seeing the world pin-sharp was fantastic. I adored my new eyesight and consigned my glasses and lenses to the bin for good, or so I thought.

At the time of treatment, laser eye surgery seemed like the future – surely everyone would be paying the average £1,000 per eye and getting perfect sight in return? At first it seemed they were. Sportsmen were advertising the

**'Our quest for perfect vision is almost over, now we want better than "perfect" vision'**

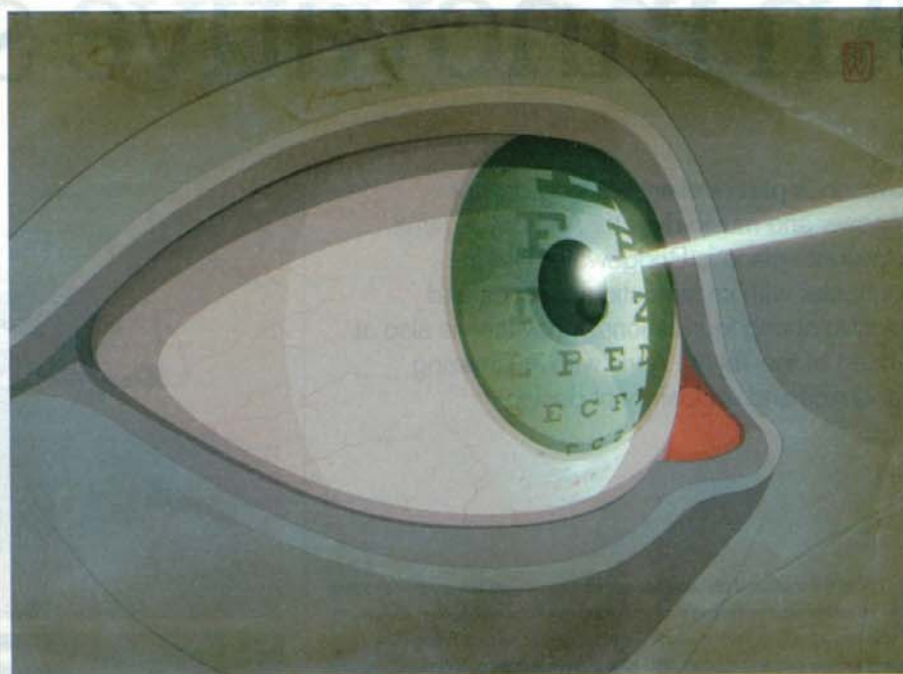
technique; pop stars told all about their new perfect vision.

But in 2008 the world still seems dominated by spectacle wearers, while manufacturers of contact lenses are increasing their ranges and boasting of higher sales. Boots, meanwhile, far from increasing its number of laser eye clinics, closed down that part of its business at the end of 2004, with a spokesman saying at the time, "We can't generate enough income from them to satisfy our shareholders."

And between 2002-3, safety concerns and lawsuits in America damaged the global reputation of laser eye surgery, with the Medical Defence Union, the largest insurer for UK doctors, reporting a 166 per cent rise in complaints in six years from those who had undergone the procedure.

Meanwhile, my own brilliant vision had somehow 'worn off' and, five years after treatment, I trudged into Vision Express and discovered that while I wasn't as short-sighted as I had been pre-surgery, I still needed a prescription to drive, and left the store with yet another pair of glasses.

Anecdotally, others have told me since then that they too were not fully satisfied and, while not regretful, were not actively recommending the surgery to their friends any more.



There are currently 105 clinics offering laser surgery in Britain, yet the number has increased by only 15 clinics since 2006, which hardly suggests a booming industry. Has the laser eye surgery bubble burst?

'I don't believe it's had its day,' said Sheraz Daya, the director of the Centre for Sight, Queen Victoria Hospital, East Grinstead. Dr Daya, a refractive surgeon, explained that although numbers of patients having the surgery have flattened out elsewhere in the world, here in the UK numbers continue to rise as Britons have been 'late adopters' of the technology.

'When you consider that we are laserising biological tissue, and not something static like plastic, it is amazing that we get better outcomes. Of the people I treat, 98 per cent get great results, with many having better vision than before they became short-sighted.'

This means they end up with sight that is better than 20:20 – the normal measure of visual acuity, or our ability to separate two distinct lines or characters at a distance of 20ft away. Although 20:20 is often described as perfect sight, it is possible to have 20:16 or even 20:12 visual acuity, which some teenagers may have naturally before it becomes weakened with age. This, Dr Daya said, is where

laser eye surgery is heading. 'Our quest for perfect vision is almost over, now we want to make better than "perfect" vision.'

You might expect a more old-style optometrist such as Brian Tompkins from Northampton, who relies on glasses and contact lenses for his trade, to be hoping that laser surgery is falling out of fashion, but he believes it has its place in the lexicon of available treatment and does not feel that lasers are taking a huge part of his business.

'At my practice I've only seen 30-40 people a year who wanted surgery, in the past three to four years. That's out of a potential client base of 1,500 a year. It will never take over, but it is available, it is safe, and the results are good.'

Is it right for everyone? 'No. I can't persuade some people to even put a contact lens in let alone have what is a very sophisticated meat cleaver slicing across their eye. Some will always want glasses, and some will want contacts.'

Tompkins pointed to other advances in the industry away from surgery – such as orthokeratology, where hard, mouldable lenses are created to be slept in – which will also threaten the hegemony of laser surgery. These shape the cornea overnight allowing the patient perfect vision without lenses

throughout the day. Some are now being developed that can mould the eye for six to nine months.

But there are still those who see the advance of laser eye surgery as unstoppable, albeit at a slow pace. 'When contact lenses first came out, it was thought they would take over from glasses,' said David Allamby, the medical director of Focus Laser Vision clinics which specialise in curing short sight. 'But the prediction didn't come true. There was a five to 10 per cent acceptance rate and that was it. Then laser eye surgery emerged and the same prediction was made. In this case I think it will come true, but not overnight.'

'Every year we do 60-70,000 cases in the UK, which has risen from 30-40,000 cases three years ago. But there are 10 million people with short sight in this country – that is going to take a lot of years.'

So if laser eye surgery is just part of a range of ophthalmological options, can it be improved upon? 'I'd like to see more continuity in care,' Dr Daya said. 'You should be looked after by the same doctor throughout the process. Yet the majority of patients in the UK are assessed by an optician, then referred to a surgeon, and then go back to the optician for aftercare. I don't think that is good enough.'