



Jackson doctors first in state to use state-of-the-art cataract laser

Published: Saturday, December 17, 2011, 10:42 PM Updated: Sunday, December 18, 2011, 2:43 PM



Brad Flory | Jackson Citizen Patriot

By

Eye surgeons in Jackson are the first in Michigan to use a breakthrough technology for laser-assisted cataract surgery.

The laser makes eye incisions with precision impossible for even the most skilled surgeon to duplicate, case after case, with a hand-held blade.

"It takes what experienced surgeons like myself and my partners do very well and takes it to a higher level of precision," said Dr. Paul Ernest of Jackson.

"I really believe this is the future of how cataract surgery will be done," said Ernest, who invented techniques including no-stitch cataract surgery, the standard of his profession.

TLC Eyecare and Laser Centers installed the laser over the summer at the Blake Woods Surgical Center, 2775 Blake Road. Manufactured by the Swiss company Alcon, it is the first laser approved by the Food and Drug Administration for cataract surgery.

Blake Woods received the first cataract laser in Michigan and about the 15th in the United States.

More than two million surgeries are performed each year for cataracts, a clouding of the eye's lens that impairs vision.

"Patients for the longest time thought we used a laser for cataract surgery, which until now was not true," said Dr. Kevin Lavery, another surgeon for TLC at Blake Woods.



Citizen Patriot | Nick Dentamaro

Dr. Kevin Lavery makes an adjustment to the cataract laser before making an incision on Renne Rice-Richards' eye.

In traditional cataract surgery, doctors make an incision by hand and break up and remove the natural lens.

An elastic-like capsule that surrounds the lens is left in place and surgeons insert an artificial lens.

The laser uses 3-D imaging to make incisions and break up the natural lens.

Lasers do not replace the surgeons, who still remove the natural lens and insert the artificial lens with hand-held instruments.

"The laser does not make a bad surgeon good," Ernest said.

One benefit of the laser is precise incisions that maximize safe and predictable results.

"This technology is very precise and very programmable," Lavery said. "It does it incredibly consistently."

By breaking up the natural lens, the laser also allows doctors to remove it with less swelling and faster healing for patients.

A third advantage is in correction of astigmatism, or blurry vision typically caused by an abnormally shaped cornea.

"With the laser, we can correct for a lower level of astigmatism, because it is more precise and more accurate," said Dr. Luis Gago, who practices in Ann Arbor and performs surgery at Blake Woods.

The laser generally is used for cataract surgery only when astigmatism is present, which is the majority of cases, Gago said.

Cataract surgery is covered by most insurance, but the laser portion of surgery is not covered because it is so new, said Cindy Hancock, director of business communications for TLC Eyecare.

TLC Eyecare charges patients \$950 for use of the laser, a fee the company says is lowest in the nation.

While the laser is new in the United States, the process of using it is familiar to eye surgeons.

Ernest said the general procedure — suction is used to "dock" the laser to the eye and the image-guided laser is programmed by doctors for the precise results they want — is similar to the process for LASIK surgery.

Several surgeries are done in a typical day at Blake Woods, and patients come from all over lower Michigan.

"We've only had it a short time, but word is starting to get out," Lavery said. "The farthest a patient has come, so far, is I think Grand Rapids."

Ernest said anecdotal results for patients appear very good, but he intends to do a scientific study.

Ileen Harmon, 67, of Munith was one of the first patients to receive laser-assisted surgery in Michigan in August.

"I asked if I was going to be a guinea pig," Harmon recalled. Any worries along that line proved unfounded.

"I had no problem at all," Harmon said.

"I feel like I can see 100 percent. I wish I had done it sooner."

Patricia Geiger, 68, of Brooklyn, said her vision had deteriorated drastically over three or four years before her surgery in October.

"My vision was bad," Geiger said. "I could not drive at night, and everything was getting blurry. Now, I would say it's 90 percent. I am very happy with it."

Renne Rice-Richards, 62, of Napoleon, had surgery on her second eye — eyes are typically done about a week apart — on Dec. 7. Two days later, she judged her vision as perfect.

"The left eye is 20-20, and it looks to me like the right one is just as good," Rice-Richards said. "I am very satisfied."

Ernest said his early educational background in engineering probably led him to develop and adopt new procedures throughout his medical career.

"Being first is not important," Ernest said. "Recognizing the technology is what is important."

© 2012 MLive.com. All rights reserved.