

## **Physician group says laser eye industry draining surgeons from public system**

By Louise Elliott  
TORONTO (CP)

A physician watchdog group says the laser eye industry is draining surgeons from a strapped public system and stretching the waiting lists for necessary operations, while also relying on "misleading" advertisements.

Dr. Gordon Guyatt of the Medical Reform Group says patients who need to consult an eye doctor or undergo non-elective procedures like cataract surgery are being pushed onto longer waiting lists by the popular operation, which promises myopic patients a life free of glasses or contact lenses. "The waiting list for ophthalmological care has increased except for laser surgery, where you can get appointments very quickly," said Guyatt, an internal medicine specialist teaching at McMaster University in Hamilton and a spokesman for the group.

"It's drawing (ophthalmologists) away from the public system." Family physicians are finding it increasingly difficult to refer patients to ophthalmologists, and some have given up and instead are relying on optometrists, "because access has become so problematic," he said. Guyatt pointed to a survey published in the Ontario Medical Review, an Ontario Medical Association journal, which predicts the number of eye doctors doing laser surgery will double by 2005. That migration of qualified surgeons who are already in short supply, combined with an aging population, will severely weaken the public system's ability to provide good eye care, the survey concludes.

"This will result in fewer ophthalmologists to perform emergency procedures, as well as longer waiting lists," four University of Toronto researchers wrote in the journal's May edition.

But Dr. Michel Pop who performs laser eye surgery at his Montreal clinic, says waiting lists are long because eye surgeons can't get enough hospital time, not because there aren't enough surgeons to do it.

"Each doctor has about half a day of surgery a week," said Pop. "Many of

those doctors will turn to private sector refractive surgery." A surgeon shortage has also been fueled by caps on the number of ophthalmology residents trained over the past 10 years, Pop said.

But studies in Alberta have shown a decreasing availability of eye doctors for procedures and assessments, said Wendy Armstrong, former head of the Alberta Consumers Association.

"Our data suggests you are going to wait longer to see an ophthalmologist who has a laser practice," she said. Armstrong said the increased privatization of other procedures such as cataract surgery has been proven to be more lucrative for doctors in Alberta. That fact has "decreased the availability of these physicians to the public plan and services completely covered by the public plan," she said, summarizing the findings of a January Consumers Association report. Guyatt also took issue with industry advertisements, which he said have "touted the benefits and ignored the risks."

"Anybody reading those (advertisements) would get the impression the procedure is almost universally successful and without problems," he said.

A Web site posted Dec. 1 by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration warns consumers of the risks of the surgery, and cautions them against "slick" advertising campaigns promising 20/20 vision.

Adverse effects listed by the FDA include "blinding complications," permanent vision loss that cannot be corrected by glasses or contacts and reduced night vision.

The industry maintains the surgery is safe and has disputed recent studies claiming high rates of night vision loss among patients. Pop, whose clinic treats about 2,000 patients a year, said the commercialization of the laser eye industry may be putting patients at greater risk.

"Since the price drop (in 1998), the clinics have to put through more numbers," he said.

"When you want to pull the volume and you are on the stock market, I

think it's not good, and it may be misleading to the public."

But Pop said the procedure is still safe, and that the same advertising rules apply to his business as to any other. "In airline advertising, they don't say, 'Oh, we had three crashes and two crashes' " he said.