

Laser Eye Surgery: The Dangers of Private Sector Health Care

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Laser eye surgery to correct myopia demonstrates the dangers of private health care, the Medical Reform Group suggested today. Misleading direct-to-the public advertising, and drawing specialists from public to private service, are serious dangers.

Tens of thousands of Canadians each year take advantage of laser surgery to eliminate the need for glasses. "The public enthusiasm for the procedure has been fueled or perhaps created by an aggressive industry advertising campaign. The campaign has touted the benefits, and ignored the risks," said MRG spokesperson Dr. Gordon Guyatt.

The US Food and Drug Administration has now posted the dangers on their web site. The FDA notes that some patients lose vision that cannot be corrected by glasses or further surgery, and that complications can create irreversible damage and even loss of vision. Finally, the FDA notes that the long term consequences have not been properly studied.

"The experience with laser eye refractive surgery highlights the dangers of health care driven by the profit motive," said MRG spokesperson Rosana Pellizzari. It demonstrates the dangers of direct-to-public advertising, in which inadequate and possibly misleading information can lead Canadians to act against their own best interests. A procedure with unknown long-term effects has gone, in less than a decade, from being an experimental operation to a surgical intervention that tens of thousands of Canadians undergo each year. This phenomenal growth highlights the challenges of regulating the private health industry."

"The laser experience highlights a second danger of private health care," Dr. Guyatt added. "We have a shortage of ophthalmologists in Canada. Many are drawn by the money-making potential of laser eye surgery. The result is an increase in the already long waiting lists for necessary eye care that is covered by Medicare."

The Medical Reform Group calls on the Health Protection Branch to notify all physicians, optometrists and the general public of the concerns regarding the limitations of laser eye surgery and its unknown long term effects and to help initiate research to establish the long-term

consequences of the procedure.