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By; Hallie Levine

IS LASER EYE SURGERY SAFE? - AS LASIK VISION-CORRECTION SURGERY EXPLODES, DOCTORS WARN PATIENTS ABOUT INEXPERIENCED SURGEONS AND SHODDY PROCEDURES

NEARLY 1.2 million Americans have undergone a revolutionary form of laser eye surgery to be able to ditch their glasses and contacts. But as LASIK advertisements plaster New York subways and are broadcast as commercials on radio airways, leading New York eye surgeons warn it becomes increasingly impossible to tell which eye surgeons have years of experience and which have just finished a weekend training course. That means trouble.

It's like liposuction - surgeons are jumping on the bandwagon and we're going to see the casualties,

The procedure itself is relatively straightforward. Myopia, or poor vision, is caused by a misshapen cornea. To correct that, the surgeon uses a laser to resculpt and flatten the cornea. Patients often have 20/20 vision instantly.

But bad results can be horrifying.

Take Owen Andrews, 35, for example. Andrews (not his real name), who had suffered bad vision since the age of 6, was thrilled when his eye doctor informed him he was a perfect candidate for LASIK, a relatively new form of laser eye surgery.

But after undergoing the 15-minute procedure last May, he was devastated. "Everyone around me had two heads and two mouths," the Manhattan computer consultant recalls of his double vision.

"My business partner saw me wandering around in the subway and called out to me, but I couldn't see any further than 10 feet," he says. "He had to lead me by the hand to get me out of the building." Andrews could barely perform his job or drive his car.

Andrews underwent another corrective laser surgery, but he still may need one to two more procedures to make his eyesight picture-perfect.

Now, he says, he wants people to know how imperative it is to find a skilled doctor for this procedure.

"My original doctor had only performed LASIK four times," says Andrews, who asked The Post not to give his real name because he is contemplating a lawsuit against his former eye doctor.

Ironically, LASIK (laser-assisted in situ keratomileusis), which has been performed on millions of Americans since it was introduced in the United States in 1996, is considered extremely safe and has been undergone by the likes of supermodel Cindy Crawford, actresses Courteney Cox and Nicole Kidman, Atlanta Braves pitcher Greg Maddux and New Age crooner John Tesh.

But a certain degree of skill is necessary to ensure that patients don't run into complications. (Doctors learn to perform LASIK in weekend courses in which they practice first on pigs' eyes before graduating to people.) People with thin corneas (the outer coating of the eye) are more susceptible to corneal scarring or infection, which can result in permanent eye damage. People with large pupils are more likely to experience glare and halos (these problems can contribute to difficulty seeing in dim light, fog or glare from bright lights at night).

Doctors also express concern about New Yorkers having the surgery performed at less than half the cost in Canada (most American doctors charge about \$5,000 for both eyes, which includes consultation, surgery, post-operation antibiotics and anti-inflammatories, and several follow-up visits). "When you are willing to leave the city based on price, you're taking an uncalculated risk," says **Dr. Mark Fromer**, clinical professor of ophthalmology at New York Medical College. "What happens if you fly home and encounter a complication? Your surgeon is hundreds of miles away."

Doctors' concern is magnified as Canadian laser companies like Lasik Vision Canada move into the American market. Lasik Vision, which has 14 offices in Canada, has already opened an office in Bellevue, Wash., where laser surgery is being offered for less than \$3,000. It also has plans to open offices in major cities like New York in the next few years, according to James Watson, its executive vice president of sales and marketing.

"I worry that these centers will try to cut costs by bringing in young inexperienced surgeons," says **Fromer**.

But centers that cut costs may also be skimping on state-of-the-art machinery and follow-up care. "From my standpoint you can't spend enough money to make sure equipment is properly maintained, that you've got enough technicians so if someone calls in sick you're not calling in your secretary to help with the procedure". Finally, doctors warn that New Yorkers should be wary of doctors who brush away health risks. "While there's over a 90 percent chance of getting 20/20 vision, you should also be told clearly about the health risks."

Ideally, your doctor should have been performing laser eye surgery for at least five years.

It's also wise to ask a surgeon how many of their patients need an enhancement, or second procedure - more than 10 or 15 percent may indicate a lack of surgical acumen.