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"Weak Eyes and Strong Eyes"

Your Life Your Health

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I am preparing this article without the aid or benefit of glasses or contact lenses. While that may not seem important to you; it is to me. In 1948, I started the first grade. I was only five and was the youngest in my class. While I was not the best student in the class, I was resourceful.

Mathematics didn't seem to make sense to me, so I simply trusted the work of the boy sitting to my right. I couldn't see the board to write down the "problems," so resourcefully, I simply wrote down his work. I hope cheating has an element of intent because I didn't intend to cheat; I simply couldn't see. In the summer of 1949, my family moved to Natchitoches, La. and I began the second grade. Now the teacher was really demanding. She insisted that I read what was on the blackboard. The only problem was that I not only couldn't see what was on the board, I could barely see the board.

After an examination, it was discovered that I had uncorrected vision of 20/400. I was told that I had "weak eyes." Because of the ability of the eye to "accommodate" -- to reshape the lens of the eye with eye muscles -- I could see to "walk around" but couldn't read. Every child who has started wearing glasses while in grammar school remembers the name calling, particularly those who had a correction which exaggerated the size of their eyes as my correction did. I shall never forget the first day at school with my new glasses. The class room was wonderful; I could see and I could learn. The playground was a nightmare. That first day, I thought that I was stepping off a cliff every time I moved. It only took a couple of days for me to adjust to the glasses, but my classmates never did.

The function of the eye is marvelous. The cornea and lens of the eye focus light like a camera lens to form an image on the retina at the back of the eye. The cornea, where light first enters the front of the eye, provides about two thirds of the eye's focusing power, and the lens inside the eye provides the other third. Some eyes focus, or refract, the light too much, so that the images of distant objects are formed in front of the retina, and the image on the retina is blurred. This condition is called nearsightedness, or myopia. Myopia usually starts in childhood and gets progressively worse through adolescence. It usually stops changing by the late teens, but it can sometimes continue to get worse into the mid-twenties.

In farsightedness, the image focuses beyond the retina. In our youth, the innate accommodating (focusing) power of the eyes often compensates for farsightedness. But as we age, our eyes become less able to accommodate. For this reason, farsightedness most commonly becomes a problem later in life. Many farsighted eyes do not need correction until the individuals reach their forties or fifties.

There is another condition which compounds problems of visual acuity, which is astigmatism. In astigmatism the image does not come to a point focus on the retina, but there are at least two points of focus that are differing distances from the retina.

After 51 years of wearing glasses, last Thursday I had LASIK surgery and now can see clearly without glasses. Many years ago, I learned, as did the world, that I didn't have "weak" eyes and those who didn't wear glasses, didn't have "strong" eyes. The entire issue was where the light focused -- on the retina, behind it or in front of it. The major matter of vision and glasses was the shape of the cornea. Until contact lenses, eye glasses were the only solution to nearsightedness or farsightedness.

LASIK is laser surgery to correct near sightedness with or without astigmatism and farsightedness with or without astigmatism. The doctor uses an instrument called a microkeratome to create a circular flap of corneal tissue. The flap is then lifted from the cornea while the doctor uses the excimer laser to remove small amounts of underlying tissue from the exposed cornea. The corneal flap is then repositioned.

I have never personally had nor recommended elective surgery which was not required to correct a life-threatening, progressive condition. However, LASIK surgery intrigued me because of my personal history with "weak" eyes. When the FDA finally approved correction of hyperopia (farsightedness) with astigmatism -- my condition -- I decided to have the treatment.

Now the question was, "Where?" Dr. Richard (Tony) Levacy has been my friend, neighbor and ophthalmologist since he came to Beaumont. Many people have gone to Houston or Atlanta to have the LASIK surgery. I consulted with Dr. Levacy and determined that I had trusted him for twenty-five years with my eye care and I would trust him with this. I also realized that physicians who need surgery have almost always stayed in Beaumont. To my knowledge, no physician who has required cardiovascular surgery has ever gone outside of Beaumont to have it. Not only does Beaumont have excellent primary health care available, but the specialty care is also excellent.

Last Thursday, Dr. Levacy performed the LASIK surgery on me. As my wife drove me home, a whole new world opened up to me. I could read street signs and the world was sharp and clear. Lights seemed brighter and the world more colorful. I had never seen my wife's face clearly without glasses and now I could. On Friday morning, I read the Bible, the Word of God, without glasses -- that will change -- but it was wonderful. Because of my age, I will eventually need reading glasses, but I will not need glasses to work in and to play in. The miracle is that this kid who had "weak" eyes is now a grandfather, able to play with his grandchildren with "normal" eyes.

LASIK surgery is not for everyone and even some people who are candidates will opt not to do it. I can tell you both professionally and personally, if you are thinking about the procedure, my doctor is a good place to start. Remember, it's your life and it's your health.