

Is LASIK Evil or Too Good?

In the course of 24 hours, two poignant communications came to my attention. The first was a report by the *Chicago Tribune* that the FDA and Congressional subcommittees are investigating some of the cases of LASIK/laser vision correction in which the outcomes failed to meet patients' expectations. The article focused on a patient who blamed his post-LASIK vision for his suicide.¹

I have enormous sympathy and empathy for anyone who commits suicide and for his family. Nevertheless, I do not believe that there is a direct causal link between having LASIK and committing suicide. Objective data from the US Department of Health and Human Services/Centers for Disease Control and Prevention place the rate of suicides at approximately 11 per 100,000 people in the general US population.² Based on this statistic and the logic used in the aforementioned article, one could estimate that 660 of the 6 million people who have undergone LASIK since the first excimer laser's approval for commercial use in the US in October 1995 would commit suicide regardless of their surgical outcome. Using logic similar to that in the newspaper article, if I cannot locate the 659 other people who committed suicide after LASIK, can I infer that LASIK actually prevented their suicide?

Simply put, I find it to be irresponsible at best (muckraking at worst) to use a tragic incident as evidence of a cause/effect relationship and to categorize it as a LASIK complication. Although not all patients achieve excellent results with LASIK initially, a solid physician/patient relationship

grounded in the practice of good medicine and a mutual dedication to resolving any problems almost always produce a happy, well-functioning patient.

On the same day I read the article in the *Chicago Tribune*, I heard John D. Lantos, MD—the John B. Francis Chair, Center for Practical Bioethics of Kansas City, Missouri—coincidentally pose a question to the Greater Kansas City Rotary Club at its weekly meeting. He asked if LASIK should be considered an illegal performance-enhancing tool, much like human growth hormone, erythropoietin, and anabolic steroids. His example was that Tiger Woods was not nearly as good a golfer before he underwent LASIK.

A large, respected US newspaper reports the cause/effect relationship of LASIK and suicide on the same day that a renowned, well-published bioethicist asks if

LASIK should be illegal, because it creates super-human vision! I could not make this up. It is simply too strange. ■



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1. Vollmer S. LASIK failure toll can be high. *Chicago Tribune*. February 25, 2008. Available at: http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/chi-lasik_25feb25,0,7016699.story. Accessed March 13, 2008.

2. Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Suicide: facts at a glance. Summer 2007. Available at: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/dvp/suicide/SuicideDataSheet.pdf>. Accessed March 14, 2008.