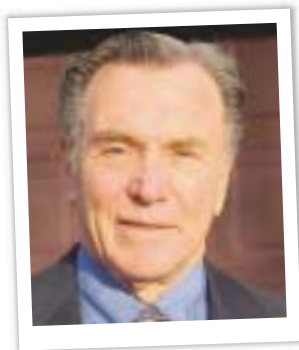


# Spencer P. Thornton, MD

Dr. Thornton discusses the state of ophthalmology in the US and the promising future of nutraceuticals.



**What have you found to be particularly rewarding about delivering patient care?** I appreciate the hands-on and one-on-one qualities of ophthalmology. As an ophthalmologist, I do not have to deal with a lot of laboratory and battery tests or searching through books and charts for answers. I interact directly with the patient and can quickly see the results of my efforts. Other specialties, such as pathology or oncology, which involves easing the discomfort of the dying process, can be discouraging. Ophthalmology involves improving patients' quality of life, something I believe makes it the most psychologically rewarding specialty.

**In your opinion, what is the greatest achievement in refractive surgery?** With the emergence of new IOL designs, restoring accommodation to the presbyopic eye and to the eye undergoing cataract surgery is a significant achievement. It is the holy grail of refractive surgery. My experiments in the 1980s showed that a properly implanted posterior chamber IOL could provide accommodation with anterior movement. Stewart Cumming, MD; Stephen Slade, MD; Jochen Kammann, MD; and others followed with lenses based on the same concept, which is why the recent FDA approval of the CrystaLens is so exciting. It is the answer for which we have been searching. The Hays scleral incisional approach to reverse presbyopia also shows promise.

**Will nutritional therapy become the standard of care within the next 5 years?** Nutritional therapy should already be the standard of care. The AMA, traditionally opposed to nutritional therapy, reversed its policy on nutritional supplements in June 2002, based on the 2001 National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention report, and recommended diet supplementation with a full spectrum of vitamins and minerals in an antioxidant formula to prevent and slow the progress of all chronic degenerative diseases. Researchers in

the ARED study estimated that 8 million Americans older than 55 years are at high risk for developing degenerative disease. According to the study, if half of the individuals at high risk were identified and compliant with the recommended supplement, 150,000 could avoid advanced macular degeneration and vision loss. Continuing medical education credits are now available in nutritional therapy. Rising healthcare costs have also contributed to the recent interest, particularly among baby boomers, who have read the promises about great breakthroughs and want to be involved. We have the most educated consumer market group in history. The public is learning about the expense, toxicity, and unreliability of pharmaceutical drugs. Nutritional therapy is becoming the revolution in healthcare, and ophthalmology is taking the lead in this field.

**Are ophthalmic practices meeting patients' rising expectations?** The public hears about the 99% success rate (the highest in any surgical specialty) of cataract surgery with lens implantation, transposes these results onto refractive and glaucoma surgery, and expects similar perfection. We have not been completely honest with the public. The liberalization of disclosure is positive, yet some individuals take advantage. Society demands open disclosure; doctors and patients are more informed and don't need authority figures or regulatory boards to guide ethical judgments. The physician is ethically bound to do his best for the patient, even if it may run contrary to the opinions of colleagues.

**What advice would you offer young surgeons entering practice?** Reductions in compensation, the expenses of purchasing new equipment, and negativity from the medical community make the practice of medicine seemingly difficult to young surgeons. My advice is to believe in the future, not to be afraid of new technology, and to be open to discovery and adventure. Similar to the stock market, science is cyclical and experiences recession, yet it is still worth exploring and investing in. ■

## FAST FACTS

- President and Cofounder of Biosyntrx (Lexington, SC), a nutraceutical company targeting specific conditions, including dry eye syndrome and macular degeneration
- Eight appearances as a guest magician on *The Tonight Show*
- Cancer survivor
- A man who considers friendship with colleagues to be the greatest blessing of his career