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Lifestyle

SECTION A

Patient Nancy Pate undergoes LenSx laser cataract surgery at Piedmont Surgery Center, performed by Dr. Joseph Parisi. PHOTOS BY KEN OSBURN/STAFF

LASERS REVOLUTIONIZE CATARACT SURGERY

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The eyesight problems began 10 years ago with difficulty driving at night. Then it was hard to see street signs.

As the problem worsened, Jim Harrell reluctantly realized he needed help to deal with his cataracts.

"They diffuse the light in a way that makes things blurry," the 71-year-old said. "And given enough time, they'll make you blind."

That clearly wasn't an option for the man who still tends cattle and cuts hay on his Fountain Inn-area farm. A Furman University grad, Harrell is on the leading edge of the Baby Boomer generation that won't compromise when it comes to health.

After meeting a few people who'd had cataracts removed through a process called introcapsular extraction and had new, plastic — and permanent — lenses placed in their eyes, Harrell became highly interested in the procedure. He's not alone. Cataract surgery is the most common in the United States today, with 3.5 million procedures performed annually.

For years, surgeons used diamond-tipped scalpels to cut a circle about one-third the size of a penny around the eye lens to remove the disc that becomes clouded with cataracts. The surgery relied on the physician's steady hand for lens capsule extraction.

While countless surgeries were successful, perfect circles to fit the circular artificial lens were difficult to create. But as laser-assisted surgery was perfected, and ultimately approved by the FDA for use in the U.S. last year, perfect circles become possible.

The technology is so brand new that Harrell had both types. A week after cataract surgery on his right eye was performed by Dr. Joseph Parisi, the new laser system was in place and Harrell became one of the first 15 patients in the Upstate last week to have the laser-assisted cataract surgery, on his left eye.

TECHNOLOGY BOOSTS PRECISION OF COMMON PROCEDURE

Harrell said he was a little leery.

"Anytime they're messing with your eyes, you want to flinch, or squint or draw back," he said, and he admits worrying about damage that a stray laser might do.

But the next day, he was a believer. "It was a more comfortable procedure," he said.

Parisi, and his partners at Clemson Eye, bought a LenSx laser system in conjunction with Greenville's Donelson Eye Associates. The two practices share the system, and three eye surgeons each performed five surgeries last week.

"It's pretty new technology from the patient's perspective," Parisi said, even though the concept and prototypes were introduced a few years ago at a national conference. Alcon's LenSx is the first of five competing companies to receive full FDA approval.

Because the laser can cut more precisely — one study produced by researchers at Stanford University's School of Medicine found the circles cut by a laser are 12 times more precise and leave stronger edges — it produces a better "pocket" for the artificial lens.

"As good as we think we are," Parisi said, "we are better with the precision of the laser."

While Parisi said he believes the laser-assisted surgeries "are a bit of a game-changer," not everyone is rapidly adopting the procedure. The American Academy of Ophthalmology released what could be described as a lukewarm clinical statement in September.

"To date, there are no studies that show superiority of cataract surgery performed with femtosecond laser assistance when compared with standard phacoemulsification," the statement says in part.

Dr. Flora Lum, executive director of the H. Dunbar Hoskins Jr. MD Center for Quality Eye Care of the American Academy of Ophthalmology, helped write the clinical statement.

She said that the current cataract surgery known as phacoemulsification, which uses ultrasound vibrations to break apart the capsule so it can be removed, is technically effective, safe and cost-effective, so there is no dire need to adopt a new procedure.

"What we want to see is more surgeries, hundreds of them at multicenters," she said. "Phacoemulsification is already fairly quick, and very successful. So, we want to see the full picture first before we'd recommend this."

Medicare does not reimburse for the entire procedure, Parisi said, so as of now ideal candidates for the procedure are patients who want premium intraocular lenses implanted. A patient pays about $1,500 per eye for the surgeon to use the LenSx system.

"It used to be, you got your cataract out and then you got glasses," Parisi said. "The Boomer demographic is the next cataract wave... They don't want to wear glasses."

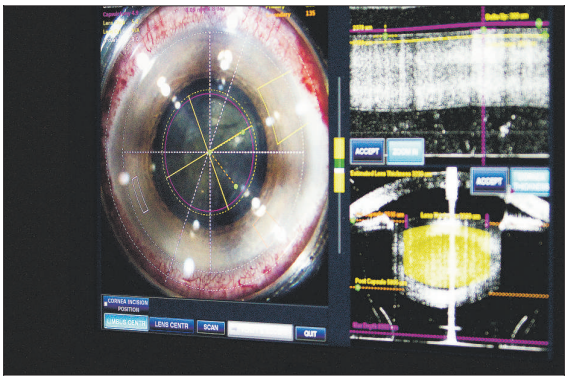
Dr. Mark Packer is a clinical associate professor of ophthalmology at the Oregon Health & Sciences University, and he teaches cataract surgery around the world. He consulted on a different laser system that is currently under review by the FDA.

"This big news is, this is clearly better," he said. "It will be even safer, create less complications, and have better outcomes."

In five years, Packer said, very few cataract surgeries won't be done with a laser, and in 10 years "they'll all be done this way."

It should be noted that every type of surgery, including those for cataracts, expose patients to risks such as infection, bleeding and even loss of vision. Even knowing that, Harrell said he's a believer.

"I'm reading and seeing things now like I haven't for years," he said. "I won't need glasses except for sunglasses. It's amazing to me."



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Custom laser cataract surgery offered in Upstate

UPSTATE- Clemson Eye Clinic will soon be offer a unique eye surgery service in the upstate.

It is one of the first practices in the Upstate, the second in the state of SC and the 50th in the nation to offer the LenSx laser for custom cataract treatment.

The LenSx laser revolutionizes the way cataract surgery is performed. Until now, cataract surgery required the use of a manual surgical blade, but with recent FDA approval, selected cataract surgeons across the country can utilize the LenSx laser and eliminate the need for a surgical blade. This "blade-free" laser approach to cataract surgery allows the surgeon to further improve the accuracy and predictability of the procedure, providing patients increased precision and faster healing time.

"Many times patients have inquired, 'Can my cataract be removed with a laser?' This notion that was once a futuristic thought is now an exciting reality. The LenSx laser will boost our surgical potential since the precision of a laser trumps a handheld blade...Even in the skilled hands of a surgeon. This is the approach I would recommend for my parents," said Joseph Parisi, MD.

Brian Johnson, M.D.

Jospeh Parisi, M.D.

"Clemson Eye feels privileged to be among the first 50 practices in the country to obtain the LenSx laser," said Brian Johnson M.D. "We're committed to providing our patients with innovative technology and couldn't be more excited to be the first in the Upstate to offer the LenSx," said Donald Glaser M.D. of Clemson Eye.

The LenSx laser will be available for laser-assisted cataract procedures on or before March 2012. Patients who are interested in arranging for a consultation can call 864-268-1000.

Clemson Eye's doctors have been serving Upstate South Carolina for over 35 years with 4 clinics in Anderson, Clemson, Easley and Greenville, along with Spectrum Lasik. Clemson Eye specializes in advanced cataract and LASIK surgery plus comprehensive medical and surgical eye care.