

protection, then examine laser surgery and the latest procedures for rectifying bad eyesight



AN EYE surgeon has avoided being struck off the register after leaving children's author Jan Fearnley with blurred vision from Lasik laser work to correct her shortsightedness.

Each year more than 100,560 laser eye treatments are carried out in Britain, mostly Lasik. Complications are said to occur in three to six per cent of patients. So would you take the risk? Here university student Sam Ross reveals his recent experience.

WHAT kind of person would pay good money to have their eyes cut open and then burned? Well, I guess that would be me. A few months ago I dug deep into my piggy bank and stumped up well over £4,000 for a surgeon to cut a circular flap in the shining surface of each eye to expose the delicate corneal tissue underneath, reshape it with a laser, and then flick the flap back into place.

"Oh, that's dangerous," said my friends, and maybe they were right. Who hasn't heard the urban legend that a friend of a friend's cousin's colleague went blind after this sort of thing went disastrously wrong?

Being short-sighted isn't exactly a major problem, but however hard they advertise spectacles with ridiculously pretty girls and hunky men, nobody actually wants to wear glasses. I longed to wake up and see the world perfectly without the hassle.

So I was tempted. My dad had met a friend who had just had refractive surgery and claimed it had changed his life. One minute he was blind as a bat, the next he could read the small print on a contract from a hundred yards. I decided to do some research.

The surgeon is the key to the success of the operation, and one name that kept popping up was Professor Dan Reinstein, medical director of the London Vision Clinic in Devonshire Place. The initial free consultation took more than three hours. The staff measured my current prescription, the size of my pupils, the quality of my night vision, the pressure inside my

Why I decided to take the surgical route

SAM ROSS

eye, the thickness of my cornea, as well as countless other things.

I was warned of the numerous risks and complications (both known and unknown) which include diffuse lamellar keratitis (a weak distorted cornea), keratectasia (inflammation under the flap) and, oh yes, blindness.

Prof Reinstein then told me two rather comforting things: firstly, most of the undesired effects would only happen if I dunked my head in the River

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Thames just a few hours after the operation. Secondly, the probability that the procedure does not go entirely to plan is 0.1 per cent — at worst I might end up with a little blurring or perhaps my night vision would be worse.

I don't remember much about the procedure, mainly because it was so quick — less than 10 minutes. It was a similar sensation to when you close your eyes and then press firmly on them. Prof Reinstein talked all the way through the operation and although I had heard that you can actually smell your flesh burning when the laser is on,

either I had a blocked nose or that was another old wives' tale.

When I sat up my first words were, "That's amazing!" My vision was far from perfect and rather blurred but was still much better than before. Sitting on the edge of the chair, my eyes doused in saline, I could read the vision chart on the wall opposite.

I had to take two different types of eye drops four times a day and then use saline drops whenever my eyes felt dry; was told to wear sunglasses outside for the first week for UV and dust protection and some crazy plastic goggles at night to stop me from rubbing my eyes.

At first I was using the saline drops every 15 minutes or so, but after the first week I only needed to "refresh" my eyes once an hour. As warned, I did have problems with night vision: I saw blurry halos and colourful starbursts around lights at night.

Two weeks on and my vision was nearly perfect. I didn't have to take any more drops but I did still see small starbursts and halos at night.

It is now several months since the operation and I have been given the all-clear after my second post-op check-up. My vision seems perfect to me, but I'm told that it will keep improving as the microscopic (and painless) swelling in my cornea goes down.

So, has laser eye surgery changed my life? Well, no, but it has certainly improved it. No longer do I have to fiddle with my contact lenses or search for my glasses. I can see perfectly from the moment I wake up and I need not bother to take out my lenses before I take a nap. The only thing I miss is my savings.