

VISION

A PUBLICATION OF THE MALONEY VISION INSTITUTE, THE VISION CORRECTION SPECIALISTS VOLUME 1, 2007

MVI PROGRAM FEATURED IN MAGAZINE FOR PEOPLE WITH SPINAL CORD DISABILITIES

*The United Spinal Association recently published the following story in its magazine on our **Focus on Independence** program. This is a two-year-old initiative we developed with Dr. Dan Durrie of Kansas City. Since 2005 we have recruited more than 25 doctors around the country to help. If you know of anyone who would benefit from this program, contact our office to arrange an evaluation.*

— Dr. Robert Maloney.

AN EYE TOWARD FREEDOM

AN EXCITING PROGRAM FOR PEOPLE WITH QUADRIPLÉGIA PROVIDES LASIK SURGERY TO QUALIFYING CANDIDATES AT NO CHARGE.

By Lori A. Wood

Wearing glasses or contact lenses can be bothersome to anyone, but especially to quadriplegics, who may not have the manual dexterity to keep lenses clean or to place contacts on the eye.

Thanks to the Focus on Independence program, which provides free LASIK surgery to eligible people who are quadriplegic, many are now able to turn an eye toward freedom.

“The program is for quadriplegics who have significant impairment in their ability to use their arms and hands,” explains Robert Maloney, MD, ophthalmologist and director of the Maloney Vision Institute, (www.maloneyvision.com), located in Los Angeles,



California. “We’re really excited about doing this for quadriplegics. For most ambulatory people, glasses and contacts are a nuisance, but for quadriplegics, they’re a real limitation. If their glasses fog up, they can’t reach up and clean them off. If glasses slip down their noses, they can’t reach down and push them up. If they want to be able to see something in the middle of the night, they can’t reach for their glasses. Having to wear glasses or contacts really undercuts their independence, and that is really the motivation for this program.

“But there are health exceptions, and part of evaluating people for LASIK is doing a comprehensive examination of their eyes,” Dr. Maloney continues. “We talk to people about why they want the procedure, and what the benefits are for them. There may or may not be enough benefits to make it worth it. We have a frank discussion about the risks. At the end, people are comfortable with their decision about whether or not to have the procedure. It turns out that most people are candidates if they’re wearing glasses and want to get rid of them.”

Continued on page 2

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Continued from page 1

Reshaping the Eye

What does the LASIK procedure entail? “It involves peeling back the outer layer of the surface of the eye, reshaping it with a laser, and then replacing the outer layer,” Dr. Maloney says. “The outer layer just sticks all by itself. There are no stitches, no needles and you don’t have to be put to sleep, since no general or intravenous anesthesia is needed for the procedure. Instead, we use eye drops. The procedure takes about five minutes per eye, and it’s painless. You’re usually a good candidate for the procedure if you have healthy eyes and are tired of wearing glasses or contact lenses.”

An excimer laser is used in the procedure, which removes tissue from the eye without burning or heating. “It’s a cold laser, and it has revolutionized our ability to correct vision. The lasers that we used before were hot lasers, which heated or exploded. That’s just not a good thing to do to the surface of your eye. If you heat it, it cooks it, and it turns hazy. If you use an explosive laser, it creates divots in the surface of the eye and blurs vision. The excimer laser, which was first applied to the eyes in the 1980s, turned out to be a really wonderful way to reshape the eye and correct vision. The way to think of it is like sculpting a contact lens right onto the surface of the eye. It’s just like wearing contacts, except you don’t have to take them out and clean them. It gives you a much greater degree of freedom.”

Making a Difference

Dr. Maloney and his colleagues at the Institute are now making such freedom available to quadriplegics. “Last year, this idea was conceptualized by Barry Elbasani, the first patient to benefit from the program. He had LASIK performed by Dr. Dan Durrie, a colleague of mine, and he thought that this would be a really great option for quadriplegics. Dr. Durrie was excited about it and got me involved, so together we’ve set up a growing network of surgeons around



the country that can do LASIK surgery for quadriplegics. It’s a way of giving to people in whose lives we can really make a difference.”

As beneficial as the LASIK procedure may be, it can also be expensive. Therefore, Dr. Maloney and his colleagues offer it to quadriplegics at no charge. “I charge \$5,600 for both eyes, and the average around the country is in the \$4,400 range,” he says. Most quadriplegics have very limited financial resources, because it’s hard for them to work. Many of them wouldn’t be able to afford this procedure any other way. Our commitment is to have a surgeon within an hour of any quadriplegic patient in the country and, so far, we’ve been able to live up to that commitment with all of our patients.”

Still, the LASIK procedure can have certain side effects. “First, your vision may be good, but not perfect. Second, you may have some glare around lights, which may make it harder to drive at



LASIK GIVES PARALYZED TEEN FREEDOM FROM EYEGLASSES

Courtney Hendrichs of Medford, Wis., was paralyzed from a winter 2002 skiing accident in which her 5th cervical vertebra was crushed. Despite efforts to fuse her 4th, 5th and 6th vertebra by specialists at St. Mary's Hospital in Duluth, Minn., where Courtney immediately was airlifted, it gradually became clear to her that she'd spend the rest of her life in a wheelchair. Courtney, 14, was a quadriplegic.

Wearing eyeglasses since third grade, until her accident Courtney never gave them a thought. She felt frustrated, for example, when she would awake during

the night and was unable to watch television without waking a family member to help with her glasses.

In 2005 she read a magazine article about Focus on Independence, a national program that provided free LASIK surgery for quadriplegics, and contacted the office of Dr. Robert Maloney, who co-founded the program. After receiving an evaluation from Dr. Calvin Sprick at the Eye Clinic of Wisconsin in Antigo, Wis., Courtney and her mother, Brenda, boarded a plane for Los Angeles and the Maloney Vision Institute.

"Dr. Maloney took off my glasses for the last time," said Courtney.

"When it was over I could see the clock on the wall and tell the time. It was the best gift I could have hoped for," she said.

Courtney graduated from high school last June with a 4.0 grade point average and is completing her first year at the University of Wisconsin. Her long term goal is to earn a doctorate in child psychology. [M](#)

*Dr. Robert Maloney consults with Courtney Hendrichs.
(Photo by Nicole Miller Maloney)*

night, which is unusual nowadays with our newer methods of custom treatment. Third, your eyes may feel drier afterwards. These conditions can be permanent."

When performing LASIK on quadriplegics, conditions like autonomic dysreflexia and spasticity may have to be taken into account. "That's something that needs to be handled differently for each patient," Dr. Maloney explains. "Quadriplegic patients are both similar to, and different from, our other patients. If a person is on a respirator, we adapt for that by placing the wheelchair right next to the operating chair. The respirator can cause some head movement, but we have lasers that can track the eye as the head moves. The patient also needs help transferring from their wheelchair to the operating chair, but these are minor differences. We have treated a number of quadriplegic patients without any difficulty at all."

Recovery from the procedure takes four to six hours. "It's the same for quadriplegics as it is for

anyone. Typically, a patient experiences mild discomfort for a couple of hours after the procedure, but then it goes away. Within four to six hours, most people's vision is almost 20/20."

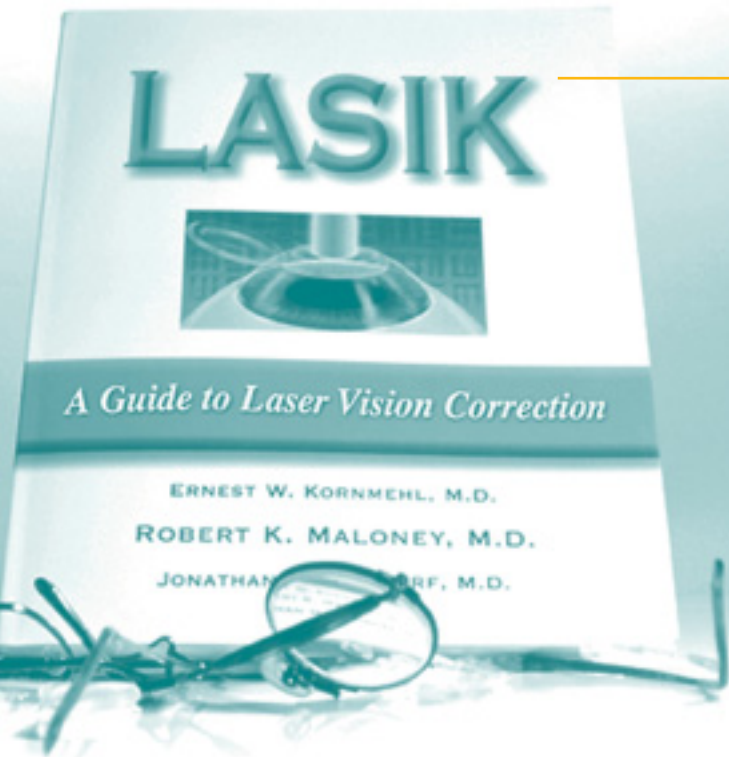
Dr. Maloney finds a great deal of satisfaction in working with quadriplegic patients. "For me, the most gratifying thing is that the patients we take care of are so grateful," he declares. "The second most gratifying thing is seeing how the surgeon community has responded. I've personally invited about thirty surgeons to participate in the program, and every single one of them has been delighted to join. We're asking surgeons to spend their own time and money, because there's a lot of cost in doing the surgery, and there hasn't been a moment's hesitation in their willingness to give of their services to quadriplegic patients. It's just been so gratifying to me to realize what wonderful colleagues I'm privileged to work with."

Lori A. Wood is a regular contributor to Action.

For more information, visit www.maloneyvision.com/whyfocusonindependence.html.

VISION

GET THE FACTS ON LASIK



If you or someone you know is considering LASIK, you should send for the second edition of this valuable book, "LASIK: A Guide to Laser Vision Correction," written by three of the medical profession's most respected eye surgeons.

Best of all, you can obtain it at no charge by calling 877-EYESIGHT or through www.maloneyvision.com.

The book contains 117 pages of easy-to-understand text, color photos, charts, graphs and a glossary of vision correction terms.

Published by Addicus Books, the edition covers the human eye and how it works, a comprehensive explanation on laser vision correction and what you should know before, during and after the procedure. **M**

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