

Worth the effort – how change led to benefits for presbyopic patients and clinic business

By Dr Robert Morris and Dr Barbara Czarnota-Nowakowska

The ability to embrace change is essential for clinical practices to evolve and develop in the fast-moving world of healthcare. In this article, two leading surgeons in the United Kingdom and Poland explain how a willingness to overhaul their clinical practices with the introduction of a laser vision correction for presbyopia has yielded benefits for their patients and their business. “The evolution from multifocal lens surgery towards a laser-based procedure with PRESBYOND has been hugely successful and satisfying from a personal perspective, a sentiment shared by my clinician colleagues,” said Robert J. Morris, MRCP, FRCS, FR-COphth, a consultant ophthalmic surgeon at Optegra’s Eye Hospital in Hampshire in the United Kingdom.

Dr Morris highlighted a dual benefit from the introduction of PRESBYOND to the Optegra network. “It has been a positive development for our patients and has helped to grow our business as well. Overall, we are helping more patients to reduce their dependence on eyeglasses, by increasing the range of treatment options,” he said. Although Optegra offers a range of ophthalmic treatments under one roof including laser eye surgery, implantable contact lenses, cataract surgery and lens replacement surgery, the principal growth in recent years has come from PRESBYOND,” explained Dr Morris. “We are still evolving and we still do lens surgery for selective refractive patients such as high hyperopes and patients with cataracts, but otherwise there has been a major trend away towards laser-based solutions for our presbyopic patients.”

MAKING THE TRANSITION

For Dr Morris, the original inspiration to consider integrating a new technology into a well-established ophthalmic practice stemmed from his own personal experience with PRESBYOND. “I was a longstanding myope and was thinking about refractive surgery to deal with my presbyopia and contact lens intolerance, and underwent very successful laser eye surgery with PRESBYOND four years ago,” he recalled.

To manage a patient’s presbyopia condition, PRESBYOND (Laser Blended Vision) creates an individually customized binocular treatment plan to be performed using the excimer laser in a LASIK procedure. The aim is to adjust each eye specifically to contribute visual information with the dominant eye adjusted to see

full distance vision and some intermediate range vision while the non-dominant eye is adjusted to focus at intermediate range and near vision. This enables the brain to blend both eye’s images more easily, creating binocular and stereoscopic vision over an extended distance range that is more physiological than standard monovision. Dr Morris views clinical change as an evolution not a revolution. Within the Optegra group, there was already a successful culture of multifocal lens surgery for presbyopia, with strong patient demand for the company’s own-brand Clarivu lens replacement package. The key was to fine-tune the strategy to appeal to the significant percentage of patients who were not candidates for multifocal lens surgery. “We reviewed our clinical outcomes and found that we had a low conversion of emmetropic and low hyperopic presbyopes. So, we were missing out on patients that could potentially benefit from treatment,” he said. Another incentive to embrace change was the fact that refractive lens exchange (RLE) patients experienced glare and halos from multifocal lenses “We had quite a high RLE enhancement rate if you include YAG laser treatment for posterior capsule opacification. RLE was responsible for about 75% of our total enhancements,” he added.

OVERHAULING THE BUSINESS MODEL

Having successfully piloted PRESBYOND in central London the decision was made to expand the technology in the UK. Optegra chose to replace existing laser platforms with the MEL 90 excimer laser as well as the VisuMax femtosecond laser (both Carl Zeiss Meditec AG, Jena, Germany) for Lenticule Extraction procedures. “Working with Zeiss gave us the opportunity to standardize our systems and presented a significant business opportunity for growth both in SMILE and PRESBYOND,” said Dr Morris. The next step was to ensure that all of the staff were on board with the new strategy and understood the opportunity it represented to improve patient outcomes and grow the business.

“In order to embrace change, we decided that we needed to educate all of the staff. We had focus groups with clinicians, optometrists and technicians. We did lots of in-house training. We sent our staff on courses. We also overhauled the business in terms of finance and marketing and standardized our marketing materials across all platforms,” remarked Dr Morris. Indeed, the standardization of equipment, techniques and processes

was fundamental to the success of the new approach, he added. “With six hospitals in the UK, there was variability in terms of equipment and surgical technique, making it difficult to compare performance between clinics. With standardization, especially in the pre-operative examination, we managed to deliver better clinical outcomes and ultimately a better business,” he said. To fully incentivize the business model, the pricing strategy for different procedures was reviewed and adjusted where necessary, explained Dr Morris. Despite dropping the Clairvu brand from its presbyopia strategy, Optegra has developed significant business growth thanks to the introduction of PRESBYOND. “We have a higher conversion rate of presbyopic patients and are treating emmetropic and low hyperopic patients successfully,” said Dr Morris. “Furthermore, all of our myopes, without cataracts, now have laser eye surgery rather than RLE surgery, particularly in view of the retinal problems associated with lens exchange in myopic populations.”

THE POLISH EXPERIENCE

The introduction of PRESBYOND to Optegra clinics in Poland has also been beneficial in growing business in a conservative market for refractive surgery, believes Barbara Czarnota-Nowakowska MD, a consultant ophthalmologist at Optegra Eye Hospital in Poznań, Poland. “Until 2019, the main procedure that we could offer to presbyopic patients was multifocal IOLs. However, in Poland RLE has never really been very popular for a number of reasons. Firstly, RLE technology arrived late in Poland owing to the economic and political situation. Secondly, public health insurance does not cover the costs of RLE. Also, university clinics do not perform refractive surgery procedures because they are not subsidized. All refractive procedures are only performed in private clinics,” she explained.

Another hurdle to overcome was that the older generation of doctors still had a very conservative attitude to the concept of RLE. “They found it unsafe and too invasive,” added Dr Czarnota-Nowakowska. “Therefore, they usually suggested a conservative choice of therapy. Another key factor is that the fact that Polish patients are wary and have a negative reaction to any intraocular procedures. It is a kind of mental barrier. Finally, Polish patients are also very sensitive to price,” she said. In 2018 before the introduction of PRESBYOND, RLE constituted 9% of all refractive surgery procedures in Dr Czarnota-Nowakowska’s clinic. The following year RLE accounted for 8% of all procedures while PRESBYOND, which had just been introduced, made up a modest 3%. “What is interesting, however, is that in 2020 the percentage of PRESBYOND procedures increased five times compared to the previous year, and this was despite the COVID pandemic. Moreover, PRESBYOND has become the procedure of choice in our clinic for patients over 40 years of age and the demand is growing year by year,” she said.

With over 1,500 PRESBYOND procedures having been performed since its introduction in Optegra’s nine Polish clinics, Dr Czarnota-Nowakowska believes there are a number of factors driving the growth. “In general, Polish patients prefer laser procedures, which for them are considered to be quicker, less invasive and less stressful. PRESBYOND offers a bilateral procedure, so it saves time and there is less inconvenience in having both eyes done at the same time. The recovery time is also very short, so this aspect also tends to influence patients’ choice of procedure. The added bonus is that the price is also lower compared to RLE,” she said.

CONCLUSION

For Dr Morris and Dr Czarnota-Nowakowska, adding a laser vision correction option to their clinical armamentarium turned out to be a positive decision for their presbyopic patients and their business. “We have higher levels of patient satisfaction now as we no longer have to deal with the dysphotopsia complaints from patients implanted with multifocal lenses,” said Dr Morris. Dr Czarnota-Nowakowska echoed Dr Morris’ assessment: “From my personal experience, PRESBYOND seems to be the best choice for busy and demanding Polish patients. It meets their expectations and allows refractive surgeons like me to gain and keep patients over 40 that I used to lose before. It is an offer that is tailored specifically for this age group and corresponds to their lifestyle requirements. From a business perspective, we can now target the biggest and wealthiest group of potential patients,” she said.

Dr Robert Morris is an experienced cataract and refractive surgeon. After undergraduate training in London he completed his post-graduate ophthalmic training at the renowned units in Oxford Eye Hospital, Moorfields Eye Hospital and the USA. In addition to his successful private practice, he was Consultant Ophthalmic Surgeon and cataract lead at Southampton University Hospital NHS Trust and Medical Director of Optegra Eye Hospitals for eight years. Throughout his career he has been passionate about surgical training in cataract and refractive surgery.



Dr Barbara Czarnota-Nowakowska is an experienced refractive surgeon who graduated from the Faculty of Medicine in Poznań. She has worked with Optegra Eye Clinic in Poznań, Poland since 1999. In 2019, she started an additional role as Management Advisor for Quality in Refractive Surgery for Optegra’s clinics in Poland. She regularly conducts training sessions for ophthalmologists in the field of corneal laser refractive surgery and is a regular speaker at national and international scientific conferences.

