Making the transition to SMILE has benefited my patients and my practice

By Robert T. Lin, M.D.

I first became interested in small incision lenticule extraction or SMILE® (Carl Zeiss Meditec AG) about four years ago. I was intrigued by the possible advantages of a procedure that provided equivalent visual outcomes to LASIK, but without its principal drawbacks in terms of flap creation and postoperative dry eye. After researching further and reading all the key peer-review studies concerning SMILE as well as discussing with many international colleagues who had already made the transition to SMILE, I became convinced that this represented a clear advance on LASIK and could serve as a catalyst of growth for my practice, 95% of which is devoted to refractive surgery.

After travelling to China in 2017, I was able to observe Lenticule Extraction being performed with SMILE on the VisuMax® (Carl Zeiss Meditec AG), and I was further impressed with the laser, a technique which would prove a valuable addition to my practice. I performed my first SMILE surgery in 2018 and witnessed first-hand how it delivered excellent outcomes and a smooth postoperative experience for my patients.

From that point onward, my practice became more and more focused on SMILE. It was almost a natural progression as I became convinced of the benefits of this solution and became more proficient at performing the surgery. My practice includes twelve offices in California which is a very competitive market for refractive surgery. We have been in business since 1999 and have built up a successful and well-known practice with significant market share in the industry. In that time, I have performed over 60,000 LASIK procedures, and even underwent successful LASIK surgery myself, so opting to change my refractive surgery procedure was not a decision that I took lightly.

As part of the learning process, it is important to be diligent and to watch the videos of other surgeons as well as record your own performance. I watched every single one of my videos after my initial surgeries to see how we can possibly improve in order to get the best possible results. Technically SMILE is slightly more difficult than LASIK, but it is still much easier than cataract surgery. If you are diligent and persevere you will get these excellent results in the early post-operative period. The bottom line is that it may take a little bit of time to master the procedure, but the return on investment can be enormous for your practice. The reduced enhancement rates and increase in patients makes learning the new procedure worth it.

RETHINKING THE BUSINESS

Making the transition to SMILE entailed much more than a surgical decision – it essentially meant overhauling our practice management from top to bottom. We involved everything from developing appropriate marketing and educational materials to staff training and patient education. This is where Zeiss being very hands-on, helping with all the key aspects of practice development including staff training, customer service and marketing in order to ensure that SMILE was fully integrated into our practice and that everyone understood their role in relation to this new technology. The Zeiss Practice Development Consulting (PDC) was very beneficial in helping us fine-tune our marketing strategy and in setting up a business plan to facilitate regional educational events in both northern and southern California for optometrists. This led to many educational events over the last few years to include educational evenings, continuing education workshops, and optometrists undergoing the procedure with SMILE themselves, and an increase in overall practice revenue through new co-management leads and treated cases.

The optometrists were really excited that there is now a procedure that has no flap, as they have been concerned about flap-related complications and incomplete healing. Due to less cornea nerve disruption the cornea has the potential to stay stronger with SMILE which showed less dry eye symptoms post-operatively in my clinics.

Overall, the Zeiss PDC was very helpful and a real collaboration that enabled us to grow our market share in a very competitive landscape. I think the Practice Development Consulting is something that definitely helps the culture of the company. We are at 95% refractive surgery practice. There are many practices that are not as focused as we are, and they would probably benefit even more from the Zeiss PDC expertise. This is because some of our colleagues offer other procedures that would make a major difference for a less focused clinic. For us, what it did was supplement the training that we were already doing and took it to the next level. We were already at a very high level and raised the bar a bit higher. Zeiss really exceeded my expectations in terms of the back-up and support services they offered at all stages of the transition to SMILE. They were very accommodating and were very responsive to any questions I had. The clinical trainers were always available whenever they were needed and service support was also on hand to field queries and ensure that everything was and still is running smoothly. In terms of marketing support, Zeiss was very helpful letting us know the type of strategies that worked in other successful markets. The PDC also helped with our overall customer service and how to improve sales conversion. A practice needs to spend time with their customer service personnel, and that we have had to re-train our staff, create new marketing materials, and invest in new technology, and it proved very beneficial for us.

REAPING THE DIVIDENDS

We were also able to introduce SMILE gradually, launching it first in our northern California office where the LASIK volume was not as high. Having observed the excellent outcomes and positive patient feedback, we also incorporated it in southern California. Confidence is key in making the transition work. The more the surgeons perform SMILE surgery, the more confident he or she becomes with the technology. This confidence transmits to the staff and the patients as well once everyone sees the first-rate results that are being obtained with SMILE time after time. Our clinic used to be almost exclusively LASIK. About 90% of patients qualify for either LASIK or SMILE, choose to undergo surgery with SMILE. The other 10% that don’t opt for SMILE usually do so for financial reasons, as we charge slightly more for SMILE. We explain to them that this new technology required considerable investment, and that we have had to re-train our staff, create new marketing materials based on the experience, and patients are asking for SMILE and not LASIK.

Moving our practice to SMILE has turned out to be an excellent decision for our patients and ultimately our business. Our results are consistently excellent with a very low rate of patients needing any type of LASIK enhancement. The LASIK enhancement rate is about 1%, while that for SMILE touch-ups is only about 0.2%. As word spreads about the visual outcomes we have been achieving, we have seen a definite increase in demand.

I estimate that SMILE has increased our revenue by at least 20%. However, the real reward is seeing how happy our patients are after their SMILE surgery. Converting to SMILE for purely financial reasons is probably not a viable strategy. Surgeons need to do their homework, get familiar with the advantages of SMILE and make sure that this new technology required considerable investment, and that we have had to re-train our staff, create new marketing materials, and invest in new technology, and it proved very beneficial for us. It gives us the opportunity to give our patients the best possible vision after surgery. The real reward is seeing just how happy our patients are. Once they believe in that, and start to see the results, everything else will follow, including financial success.

Dr Robert T. Lin founded IQ Laser Vision in 1999 and has successfully performed more than 60,000 refractive procedures over the past 23 years. Dr Lin received his undergraduate education from UC Berkeley and his medical training at UCLA. He completed his ophthalmologist residency at the prestigious Jules Stein Eye Institute at UCLA where he is currently an Assistant Clinical Professor.

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