

## ▶ Laser Eye Surgery

# Australian team share their vision

WITH a major breakthrough in laser eye surgery being heralded globally, Melbourne-based ophthalmologist Dr Noel Alpines is traveling the world to share his vision.

Around 10 years ago, he developed a new laser surgery technique for improving the outcomes for people undergoing laser eye correction for astigmatism.

The technique relies on a complex calculation method called vector planning, and trials have been so successful that 50-year-old Dr Alpines has even treated his own daughter with his wife's blessing.

Around one million Australians are thought to suffer from astigmatism and formerly people suffering from keratoconus, a thinning of the cornea of the eye, were deemed unsuitable for laser eye surgery. But now, thanks to Dr Alpines, those one in 80 Australians now undergo treatment and enjoy corrected vision.

"This is an advance on the current laser treatments and using the new technique we are able to treat these very challenging eyes, achieve what had never been done before," says Dr Alpines.

"It's a life-changing procedure," according to his colleague, 42-year-old optometrist George Stamatelatos.

"People who have it and become free of glasses say it's like a dream come true. The change is instant, and they love their improved quality of lifestyle," says Dr Alpines.

The enthusiastic ophthalmologic duo recently returned from Stockholm, where they presented a course on treating astigmatism for a decade. He estimates that probably 65 per cent or more of people have an astigmatism.

Dr Alpines says of his technique: "It's a sophisticated procedure - you just can't send



someone a piece of software and expect them to get on with it."

The two doctors believe that at around \$2000-\$3000 per eye, laser treatment has become a routine and affordable procedure.

Dr Alpines explains that his technique differs from conventional laser treatment in paying attention to the shape of the cornea, leaving this part of the eye in better shape after surgery.

Sufferers of astigmatism have a condition in which the cornea is more of an oval shape than the usual round shape, leading to problems such as headaches, blurred vision, and tiredness.

As glasses and contact lenses are not always suitable solutions for this condition, the precision

achieved by the vector planning allows surgeons to more exactly target the irregularity caused by astigmatism.

Vector planning has been used by the clinic since 1994, and over that period some 10,000 patients have been successfully treated.

The doctors decided not to publish until they had accumulated 10 years of patient follow-up to back up their claims.

The low re-treatment rate of two per cent over that period has impressed medical colleagues, and the results have recently made waves internationally, being featured in major industry journals.

Together with Dr Stamatelatos, Dr Alpines

pioneered a ground-breaking trial to investigate the effectiveness of the Vector planning laser surgery technique.

They are delighted that they are now able to assist people whose eyes had previously been deemed unsuitable for normal laser eye surgery.

To prove his technique worked in the immediate and long term, Dr Alpines financed a decade-long study into the technique which was published in a peer-reviewed journal two months ago.

"Peer view is very demanding because they put the manuscript to someone very expert in the area," says Dr Alpines.

However, the results and methodology spoke volumes and his articles have been published in 14 peer review journals. Since then, the world's ocular press has been raving about the technique.

Now Dr Alpines' and Dr Stamatelatos' passports show the proof of their global popularity, and they are constantly being approached for international speaking engagements because the technique removes more of the astigmatism and provides a better result for patients.

While they received some initial resistance to the Vector process when they first published their results in 1993, surgeons around the world have since sat up and are taking notice.

"It was obviously something so new that we had a lot of trouble getting over the threshold, but now it's been accepted and we feel very gratified," says Dr Alpines.

He has international patents on the technique and is licensing the program out to other laser surgeons world wide.

"It's certainly not painful, and people are over the moon with the visual result," he says.

Dr Alpines currently runs three laser vision clinics in Melbourne.

## > CASE STUDY

# Family affair is a huge hit

SOME families bond over footy, other go on fishing weekends or even an extended holiday. But not many take it as far as the Geelong-based Skiltons, who in 2006 took their eyesight from myopic to marvellous within seven days.

Their poor eyesight saw the family of five investigating, planning and finally inspiring each other to undergo the Vector laser surgery within a week.

Janet Skilton, who had worn glasses since she was eight, says that she's absolutely delighted with the results.

"Without my glasses I could not see an inch in front of me," explained the mother of three.

Her husband, Terry, who endured strong prescriptions for his contacts and glasses for over 20 years, is thrilled.

"It's great now," he says. "We saw the video of my brother-in-law having laser surgery and it didn't look too bad, so we thought we'd give it a go," he says.

"My wife, son Wade and youngest daughter Anthea had their eyes lasered the first Friday and Melissa and I were done the week later," he says.

However, Terry, who confesses to having fainted each time his wife gave birth, did experience a few queasy moments.

"While it doesn't hurt, it just feels a bit yucky, when they put the clips on your eyes to hold them open," he says.

Daughter Melissa heartily agrees.

Melissa, 25, has worn glasses for many years. She says: "It's fantastic. The other day I was cooking pasta and didn't have to worry about my glasses fogging up."

Son Wade, 20, who loves playing pool, had already recommended the procedure to some friends.

"It feels great, I always hated wearing the glasses," he says.

His sister Anthea, 22, works as a financial planner and loves playing netball even more than ever, now that she no longer has to worry about having her spectacles hitting the court when she's trying to shoot a goal. "It's fantastic," she says.