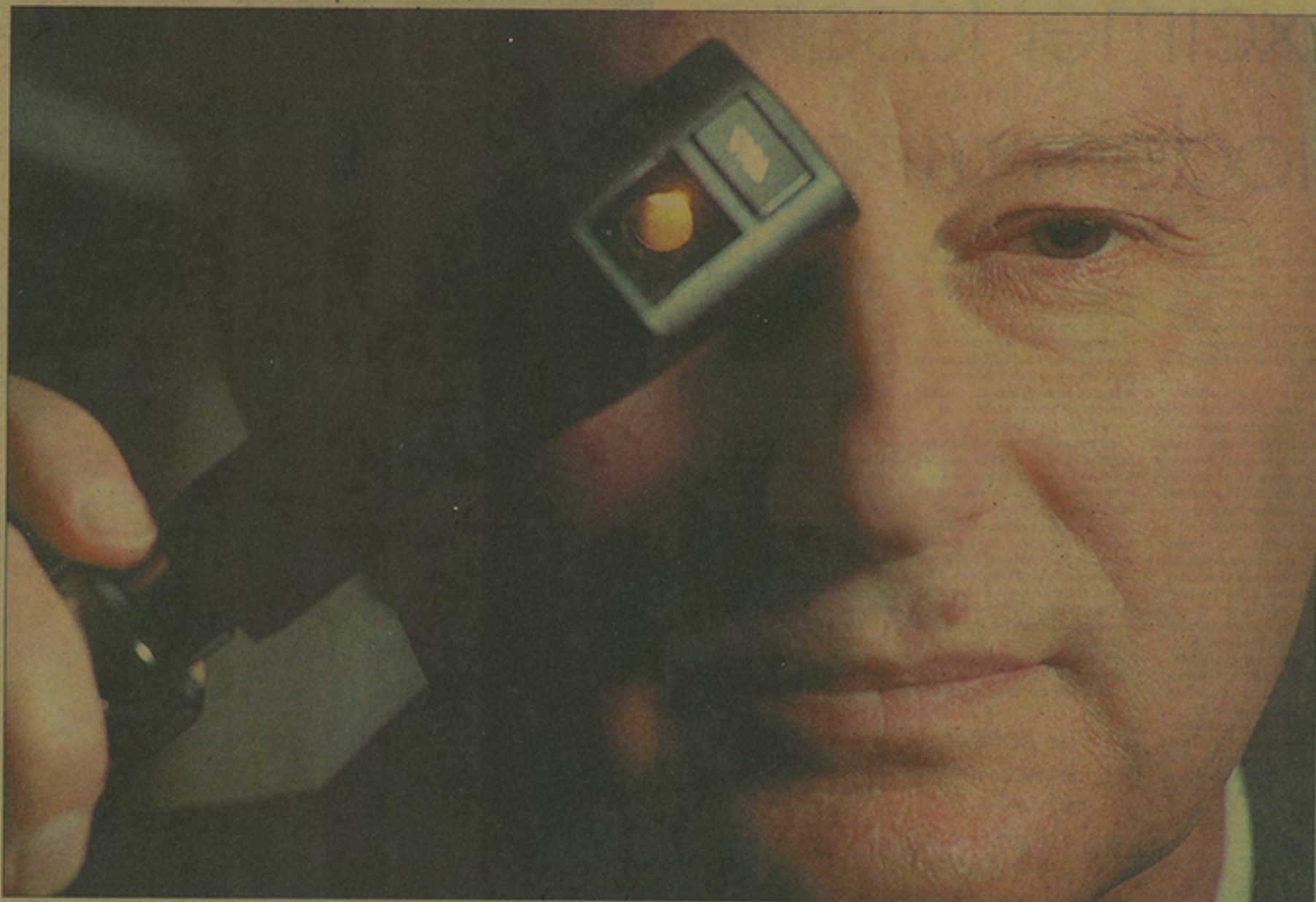


## LASER VISION II

E1

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*An advertising supplement on laser eye surgery*

Dr. Sheldon Herzig of Toronto's Herzig Institute sees a problem in the future. Laser eye surgery may be quick and provide fast results, but it "can't be treated like some off-the-shelf commodity."

## New vision in sight

**H**alf of the world's population suffers from some form of vision problem. In North America alone, there is an estimated 160 million of them. Doubt that? Look at the people around you wearing eyeglasses.

That's the bad news. The good news is that number could drop like a stone in a well in the near future. Not through some miracle of genetics, but through a simple procedure called laser corrective eye surgery.

To date, laser surgery — procedures such as Lasik and PRK — has been the preserve of, if not the rich, then certainly the well-off. The rapid growth of chain operations, however, is making the market for laser surgery an almost cut-throat bazaar. Today, new clinics can offer special introductory deals priced as low as \$499 an eye. At the other end of the spectrum, private surgeries, doctor owned and operated, are more likely to charge five times that. In between, there is almost any price point you can think of.

Availability and affordability are expected to drive the business of repairing defective vision — permanent

date, about one million North Americans have had laser corrective eye surgery. This year will likely see another million done. Next year, the numbers will double and double again in the year after that.

"This field is still in its infancy," says Ghassan Barzi, president of Icon Laser Eye Centres, a Toronto-based chain with 30 clinics in North America and 10 in Europe. Icon has experienced amazing growth for a company that started just two years ago with a single clinic in London, Ont. "We believe we've penetrated less than 2% of the market," Mr. Barzi says.

That growth has been fuelled, in part, by competitive pricing. New Icon clinics offer special introductory offers as low as \$499 an eye for lasik surgery, rising to first \$799, then \$999 as the clinic establishes itself.

For now, laser surgery clinics will be confined to major centres, adds James Watson, executive vice-president of Lasik Vision Corp. of Vancouver. Lasik has 15 clinics in Canada and 16 in the United States and charges \$699 an eye. To date, all branches are in major population centres, although there may be more than one branch in each big city. "We have to establish where the market

is," Mr. Watson says. "Chains like ours can only offer dramatically lower prices if patient volume is there to support it."

Even smaller practices are branching out, not necessarily with second or third clinics, but with information centres, which can attract potential clients who would not have considered the procedure otherwise. The

#### A MILLION NORTH AMERICANS HAVE HAD LASER EYE SURGERY

Bochner Eye Institute of Toronto, for example, is opening an information centre in Unionville, Ont. "It is a response to demand from people seeking information," says Dr. Harold Stein, one of three Bochner partners. "If they decide to pursue surgery, we will pick them up in a limousine and deliver them downtown to the institute. After the operation we chauffeur them back to Unionville."

The more people who have the surgery, the more friends and rela-

tives are told. When that network of referrals reaches a critical mass, the eye surgery industry expects an explosion in demand.

While welcoming demand, the business seems to be split into two camps. Those who favour low-priced procedures and a mass market; and those, primarily surgeon-run, small operations, that fear a focus on price overlooks the fact that laser surgery is, indeed, surgery and should not be trivialized.

"I see a definite problem," says Dr. Sheldon Herzig of Toronto's Herzig Institute. "I am concerned that corrective eye surgery is being made into a commodity rather than the surgical procedure it is. It may be quick; it may provide fast results, but it is still eye surgery and can't be treated like some off-the-shelf commodity."

Operators of national and international chains counter by noting their prices are a function of lower markups on higher volumes; their volumes give them greater clout with suppliers. As for quality of care, they point out that the more procedures a surgeon performs, the better he gets and quality of care improves.

As the expansion and the debate over quality and price continue, a

new model may be taking shape. Image Sculpting International Inc. claims the way of the future is a chain that combines both vision correction with cosmetic surgery. Image Sculpting already has an 8,000-square-foot facility with two excimer lasers in Toronto's Yorkville district, a cosmetic surgery practice around the corner on Avenue Road, a new laser centre in Detroit, plus a seven-outlet Josephson's Opticians Ltd. chain in Toronto.

Its aim is to take a one-stop-shopping approach to all eye care and image shaping needs, says president Norm Farquhar. "In the past, opticians were trained to fit and sell eyeglasses and, perhaps, contact lenses. We are training all Josephson staff to also deal with anything that affects the eye — eyelid rejuvenation and laser corrective vision surgery, for example," he says. "Same with clinic staff. If someone comes in for laser hair removal, they are also told of the benefits of corrective vision surgery and vice versa."

The day will soon come, he says, when all clinics will realize their market is limited. After that, it's but a short step into the broader field of total image shaping.