

Look Into My Eyes



REM.fm's **Mary Harboe** counts down the months, weeks, days and hours to her life-changing laser eye surgery in the safe hands of Professor Reinstein at the **London Vision Clinic**

Two months before

Is there such a thing as coincidence? I am not sure, but it certainly seemed rather odd that within the space of 24 hours I had heard a new word – 'presbyopia' – mentioned in two completely different circumstances. Of course, if I had studied the classics I might have worked out the meaning of a condition from which I – and the rest of humanity, if we live into our fifties – suffer.

It was pronounced 'prez-bee-oh-pee-uh' by Stephen Fry on QI, who went on to explain that it was from the Greek for "old". Its exact definition goes something like this: "farsightedness due to ciliary muscle weakness and loss of elasticity in the crystalline lens." In other words, it's when your arms become too short to read the newspaper, the figures on

your watch are mysteriously blurred or you find yourself saying to your dinner companion, "you choose" because you are too vain to admit to needing specs to see the menu.

I also spoke of 'presbyopia' with Professor Dan Reinstein, Medical Director of the London Vision Clinic. We had decided to include eye health on my medical programme on REM.fm and were exploring the amazing advances of laser eye surgery. Prof Reinstein is a world-renowned expert in refractive surgery and LASIK laser vision correction – having performed some 8,000 procedures. Prior to this, I had no idea that aging eyes could be corrected by a relatively simple laser procedure in the capable hands of this highly skilled ophthalmologist. Obviously I knew that other sight problems could be lasered away, but had

falsely assumed that reading glasses just went with the territory of being a "certain age". I was not alone and questions from listeners came thick and fast.

Fortunately, Dr Dan is also gifted in the art of making complicated explanations understandable to us lay people. Put simply, his procedure involves lifting the cornea, reshaping the lens underneath and then replacing the cornea. Within minutes, this results in the appropriately named 'Wow Factor': the patient can read without glasses, happy in the knowledge that they'll never again try and shampoo their hair with conditioner (surely I am not the only one who has had a bad hair day like that?). I definitely want it done.

One month before

If one more person says to me "you are brave" I will scream! Since accepting the invitation to have laser surgery at the London Vision Clinic, I have gone from being wildly excited to being filled with doubts and trepidation.

I was absolutely unprepared for the reaction of friends and family. These have included trying to talk me out of it – citing not just the unsubstantiated risks – to complimentary comments about my

extensive wardrobe of reading glasses, which have suddenly been elevated to attractive fashion accessories, with the added advantage of covering wrinkles! I confess to having around a dozen pairs in all colours and combinations: black and white, grey, beige, brown, flowered, various tartans, pink, blue, black and red, olive green and, my current favourites, a kind of luminous lime. Let it be noted that I have embraced presbyopia with bright and colourful enthusiasm!

Meanwhile, braver friends have treated me as a guinea pig, requesting step-by-step progress with comments such as, "If it all works out, I'll have it done too."

For my part, all this negativity has left a mark and I find myself wondering whether I should abort the project. Is the risk – however miniscule – of damaging my eyesight in the pursuit of vanity and convenience, too great?

And then I imagine what a glasses-free life would be like and it beckons blissfully on the horizon. To be able to carry out all those everyday chores without a pair of specs either on my nose, head or perched in my cleavage would be fantastic. To be able to just look at something without first searching for the glasses... wouldn't that be just wonderful!

One week before

The serious countdown has begun and my biggest preoccupation is the actual procedure – assuming that the check-up makes me a suitable candidate.

Whenever faced with frightening or painful situations – dentists, gynaecological examinations, etc – I put into practise my yoga meditation techniques: deep breaths and visualisation (I usually go for a deserted beach, gentle waves and swaying palm trees) but to reach nirvana I need to CLOSE MY EYES. Obviously not possible if they are pinned open. How will I react?

One day before

How vain and superficial I must be that in the midst of this fascinating experience, I find that I am concerned about not being allowed to wear makeup for a while? Not even a trace of mascara!

Three-and-a-half hours of eye tests later and I am convinced that there is not the tiniest fraction of a micro-millimetre of my eye that has not been examined by the professional LVC team – each one inspires great confidence.

I learn four important things: the reason I don't particularly like driving after dark is because my night vision is not great;

that I don't have quite as many cells at the back of my cornea as optimum; that the front of the cornea (the flap that is due to be lifted in surgery) has one corner which is not as secure as it should be; and that my right eye – diagnosed as 'lazy' in childhood, has still not pulled its socks up.

All of these findings have fine medical names and are not particularly rare or

Also forbidden on operation day are hairspray, perfume, deodorant and, rather surprisingly, wool as, apparently, loose fibres can shed miniscule amounts of lint. In terms of after-care, I will be sleeping in eye shields for a week; the eye drop sequence is explained in minute detail.

I am disappointed to learn that the three pill cocktail – anti-inflammatory, pain relief and anti-nausea – does not include a



exclusive. I learn that, although I am a candidate for surgery, a choice needs to be made. Dr Dan explains the two different laser techniques and after careful consideration I go for the LASIK. Although I am assured that the end result will be the same, the 'healing' time might vary – anything between three hours and three weeks before my eyes reach optimum results. I might need to stay a few extra days in London. All will be revealed tomorrow...

The night before

Of course, I don't sleep. Who would after reading pages and pages of medical consent forms outlining every possible worst-case scenario? Each page must be initialled. Dr Dan says that it is the 'bullet-proof' option; after all, in the wrong hands, even a routine plane flight can be an extremely dangerous experience. I am relieved to know that my 'pilot' is an expert who knows how to avoid any turbulence and this particular 'aircraft' is in tip-top condition with the latest equipment.

Should anything untoward happen, I am confident Dr Dan will know how to land us safely. I am also aware that neither the captain, or any flight crew wear glasses – I think I would find it rather disconcerting to be treated by someone still in specs.

One hour before

I am not looking my best sitting in the waiting room without makeup (again).

tranquilliser. I was hoping for something to calm my nerves.

Dr Dan carries out some more checks before prescribing chocolate for its feel-good properties and yes, it really is just what the doctor ordered! After a yummy chocolate treat and a wonderfully soothing, head and shoulder massage, I am ready for anything...

Surgery

As promised it is not as awful as one might imagine. Although obviously not pleasant, I suppose it could be described as uncomfortable rather than painful. Dr Dan describes every moment of the procedure – the colours I will see, the sensations I will feel – his voice is comfortingly reassuring. Sitting up afterwards – despite the blurring effects of the anaesthetic – I can read. I can read, but I am not allowed to... at least not yet. I must rest my eyes overnight and concentrate on the 15-minute eye-moisturising and anti-infection drop routine. But it truly is amazing... I can read without glasses for the first time in years. It's like a miracle. ■

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