To See or Not to See? That is the Question.

Fred Gielow. 11-21-25.

I got a new prescription for my glasses in 2016, and six years later (after I moved to Fort Myers, Florida), I thought I might need a upgrade. I found I was frequently using a magnifying glass to see fine print, and I needed to enlarge the font size on my computer screen so I could better read it. I had been seeing an eye doctor annually, and in 2022, I got another prescription and it made a big improvement in my sight.

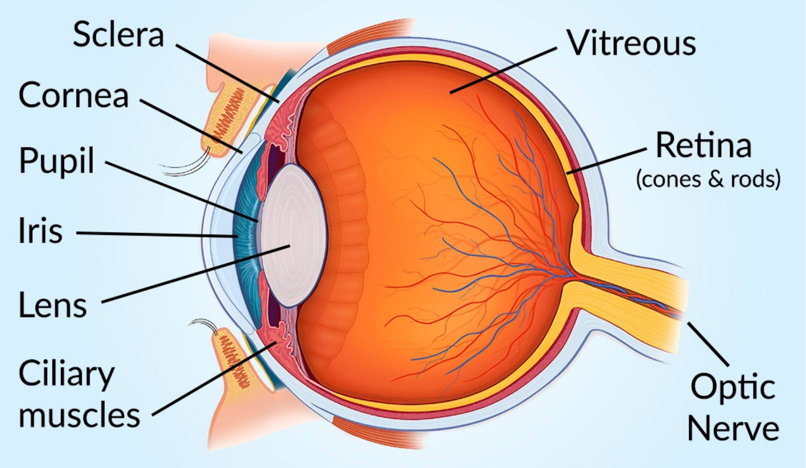
For the first time, I bought new frames from a website on the Internet. I liked how they looked, but I wasn't sure how they'd look on me or how they'd fit. So, I printed out the image (right), then adjusted it with my computer until the scale was 1:1. I cut out the image and cut out where the lenses would be. I put the paper image on my nose and looked in the mirror. The fit seemed pretty good, so I bought the frames and had my eye doctor's office insert the new lenses. I think I probably saved $100 or more by buying frames on line. (Photo: My new glasses, November 4, 2022.)

Not too long after that, my eye doctor (Doctor R) said my sight was no longer good enough to allow me to have a driver's license. That was a real blow, but I had noticed my driving was becoming more erratic as time passed. So, my driving days were over. I sold my beloved red Pontiac Solstice. Thank goodness for Lyft. It became absolutely invaluable.

Doctor R also said I had cataracts and they should be removed. She said new glasses prescriptions wouldn't help me see any better because the cataracts were so entrenched. Even though several friends had successful cataract surgeries, I was uncomfortable with the idea of operations on my eyes.

Some time later, Doctor R recommended that I see a specialist (Cornea Specialist G), because not only did I have cataracts, my corneas were also cloudy and they were impairing my vision as well.

Cornea Specialist G said I needed to have the lenses of both eyes replaced, but I also needed to have a cornea transplant for each eye.



This was not happy news. I felt very uncomfortable with the idea my corneas would be removed and replaced with corneas from a *cadaver*. Oh, no! (Source of eye diagram: https://cdn.aarp.net/content/dam/aarp/health/conditions_treatments/2020/11/1140-eye-anatomy-diagram.jpg)

I asked Doctor R if I had to make a decision immediately. No, she told me, but I shouldn't delaly beyond six months.

During those six months, I kept thinking about what I was confronted with. How was I going to deal with this dilemma?

Both Doctor R and Cornea Specialist G led me to believe my sight would not be restored unless both the lens *and* cornea of each eye were replaced. I wondered how such an operation would be performed. Just thinking about it was unpleasant.

Anyway, the decision day arrived and my choice then seemed obvious. If I didn't have the surgery, I'd probably go blind. I agreed to have the operations.

The first, for my left eye, was scheduled for September 2, 2025. I was given two lens replacement options: the "Refractive Package," at a cost of $1500 per eye, or the "Astigmatism Correction Package," at a cost of $3,750 per eye.

After a while, I got to thinking: I have rather robust health insurance coverage. Why do I need to pay extra for my surgery? Why weren't all the costs covered?

I decided to call my insurance company. The representative said my policy does indeed cover all expenses. I was confused.

I called Doctor R's office and was told she recommended either of the two options named above. She wouldn't recommend anything else. These options, I was assured, included significant technology improvements not covered by my insurance. Why wouldn't my coverage include technology improvements? That seemed strange. Something wasn't right.

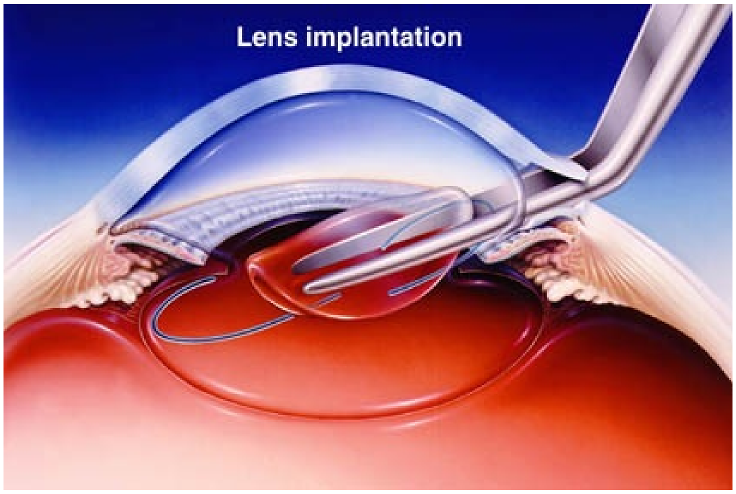
I called my insurance company again. The representative arranged a three-way phone conversation with Doctor R's office. It seems – surprise, surprise – there *was* an option available, the cost of which would indeed be *fully* covered by my insurance. I just hadn't been told about it.

The day after the call, I went to Doctor R's office and signed the necessary papers for that option. (I had previously signed up for the "Refractive Package" and those papers were destroyed.)

As I thought about the upcoming operation, the idea hit me that in spite of what Doctor R and Cornea Specialist G had told me, maybe just my lenses could be replaced. Surely the lenses had significantly more cloudiness than the corneas. Maybe I could tolerate the cloudiness in my corneas. Maybe I didn't have to have cornea transplants. After all, I don't have decades of life ahead of me.

During the pre-op meeting a week or so prior to the scheduled surgery, I asked if there was any way to just replace the lenses, without replacing the corneas. I was told the normal procedure is to have the lenses of my eyes replaced, then when the eyes had healed sufficiently, there would be a review to determine whether to have the cornea transplants.

Well, Hallelujah! Eureka! That was *exactly* what I wanted. What wonderful news! But, how come I hadn't been told that before? I felt deceived.



In spite of the good news, I was still apprehensive about the operation. How can someone invade the human eye, remove the lens and replace it with a plastic substitute, all without harming the eye? It seemed impossible that could be done. (Drawing source: https://eyemantra.in/cataract/cataract-surgery-lens-options/)

Yes, I knew, it had been done successfully thousands upon thousands of times. Some of my friends had it done. My brother had it done. VisionCenter.com says the success rate is 95 to 98 percent. It was still scary to me. I'd prefer a success rate of 100 percent. The eyes are so very precious.

Prior to my surgery, I needed to take Systane lubricant eye drops several times each day. I was told this would soften the tissue and make it easier for the surgeon (who, by the way, would be Doctor R) to perform the actual operation. I took the drops every day without fail. I faithfully followed all the instructions I received.

Fortunately, my son, Tim, was able to drive down from Clearwater, Florida, pick me up on the day of the surgery (9-2), and drive me to the Surgery Center. I had been told someone I knew *must* drive me back home after the operation. No exceptions were permitted. Tim was that someone.

I arrived on time, about noon, and after completing additional paperwork, I was led to the pre-op area. I was told an injection in my arm would make me semi-conscious, but I'd be able to hear instructions and react to them. I was told there would be no pain. I was advised that when the surgery was over, I probably wouldn't remember anything that had happened while I was in the semi-conscious state.

I remembered everything that happened during the surgery. My eyelid was opened and held open by some kind of device, and some sort of liquid was applied. Or, at least it felt that way. I was told to lift my chin, and I did. Tape was attached to my forehead to immobilize my head. I could not see clearly at all out of my left eye – that was a good thing! – but I could see motion. I kept hearing some motor or device going on and off, on and off. I wondered if it was a laser. I felt no pain whatsoever. Thank goodness for that!

When the operation was over, I asked how long it had taken. “How long do you think?” an attendant asked. I guessed 40 minutes. The actual time was 36 minutes.

I was given a couple of cookies to eat and some juice to drink (I was not allowed to eat or drink anything before the operation), then I was escorted to the pick-up area. Tim in his car drove up a few seconds later, and I was on my way back home.

When I finally opened my left eye, I saw a flood of bright light, just as I expected. After my brother had his cataracts operation, he couldn’t stop exclaiming how bright everything appeared.

Everything my left eye saw was bright – very bright – but I couldn’t see any detail. None whatsoever. It was as though I was looking through a piece of waxed paper. I could barely see colors, just splotches of light and dark. And it felt like there was something in my eye, like a speck of dust or dirt. What happened to the sight in my left eye? When will my vision clear up? *Will* my vision clear up?

I wondered what went wrong during the operation. Was Doctor R inexperienced? Incompetent? Was she simply inept? I can’t believe she would botch the operation simply because I didn’t take one of the “recommended” lens packages I was offered. I did notice, however, when I checked online, her Yelp rating was not impressive at all: only 3 out of 5 stars.

Before I had left the Surgery Center, I was issued a plastic shield to wear over my eye so I wouldn't unconsciously rub or scratch it. The doggone thing was Scotch taped to my face! I was told to sleep with it on every night for a week or so, but I decided after the first night to sleep with my glasses on instead. That provided the same protection, I figured, but without the Scotch tape and bother. Besides, the tape didn't stick to my face very well.

At eight o'clock the morning after my surgery, I met with Doctor R for a post-op examination. When I got to her office, I still couldn't see with my left eye. Everything was a blur. Basically, I was blind in that eye.

Using her equipment, she carefully examined the eye. She assured me there was nothing to be concerned about. "It's just swelling," she said. "The cornea is somewhat swollen. That's to be expected when a lens is replaced. And there's a buildup of liquid," she added. "The swelling will go down shortly and then you'll be able to see with that eye again."

What a relief! I was beginning to think I'd be blind in that eye forever. I was wondering how I'd get around, since my right eye still had cataracts and my vision with it was not good at all.

But wait a minute. How come everyone else I knew who had cataracts removed didn't seem to have swelling and sight loss?

I was told to get a bottle of Muro 128, an eye drop that would help remove some of the fluid from inside the eye, and it would also reduce pressure on the cornea.

After my appointment, Tim and I had breakfast together. Then he headed back to Clearwater. I walked over to the nearby Publix pharmacy to get a bottle of Muro 128.

I couldn't find it on the shelves, so I asked the pharmacist. She couldn't find it either, but said she had worked at CVS for ten years and she *knew for certain* CVS carried it.

The closest CVS was less than a mile away. The weather was good and there was no sign of rain, so I walked there.

Once again, I couldn't find Muro 128 on the shelves, so I asked the pharmacist. She said it was a prescription drug and I'd have to have a prescription. I knew that wasn't true. With my cell phone, I looked up Muro on the Internet and showed her the website. She then said it was probably somewhere on one of the nearby shelves, but she didn't know exactly where. "Those shelves aren't part of the pharmacy," she said defensively.

I asked two people who were stocking shelves. One said she didn't know where the product was. The other said CVS *used* to carry it, but *doesn't* any longer. Oh, bother.

When I got back to my apartment, I called Doctor R's office and it was suggested I could order the drops via the Internet, and I should start using them immediately upon receipt.

I placed an order with Amazon and signed up for overnight delivery to speed shipment.

The package did not arrive the next day as it should have, but instead the day after. I began taking the drops immediately.

I had to take one Muro 128 drop five time a day, spread out throughout the day. I also had to take four drops of another

medication (from the bottle with the red cap in the photo) that was required to prevent infection. I could not take both drops together because they would interfere with one another, so I took a drop of one or the other every two hours from 8 in the morning to midnight.

I had another appointment September 11th. I still couldn't see anything with my left eye. My worry about being blind in that eye was intensifying.

Doctor R wasn't available for that appointment. I wondered why she wouldn't see me. Maybe because she thought I might be furious that she made me blind in my left eye.

No, I wasn't mad. What will be will be. Anyway, another eye doctor in Doctor R's office advised me to go back and see Cornea Specialist G once again.

I was able to get an appointment with him the next day (the 12th).

The bad news: he said I had an inherited cornea trait called Fuchs dystrophy that caused my blindness. It wasn't the swelling Doctor R had indicated.

> The cells lining the inside of the cornea are called endothelial cells. Those cells help maintain a healthy balance of fluid within the cornea and keep the cornea from swelling. In Fuchs dystrophy, the endothelial cells slowly die or do not work well, causing fluid buildup within the cornea. The fluid buildup, called edema, causes thickening of the cornea and blurred vision. (Source: https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/fuchs-dystrophy/symptoms-causes/syc-20352727)

The good news: he said there was a remedy.

But, there was more bad news: the remedy was a cornea transplant. However, only one of the five cornea layers would need to be replaced.

Hope returned! I *will* get sight back in my left eye! Cornea Specialist G said so. But, I still didn't like the idea I'd get a dead person's cornea.

Then, I realized I would probably need the same type of transplant in my right eye, too, when my left eye was properly back in service.

My next surgery (the cornea replacement) was scheduled for October 15th, with a pre-op appointment a week before and a post-op appointment a week after. I found that fortunately, Cornea Specialist G was a highly regarded eye doctor. Framed certificates confirming this were displayed on several walls in his office suite. And he would be my surgeon. That was a comfort.

While I waited for the upcoming operation, it seemed vision acuity in my right eye was weakening. I found it harder to read even medium-sized print on products at the supermarket. Reading ingredients on labels was impossible. I noticed that not only was my close vision getting worse, it seemed my far vision was as well. And of course with a blind left eye, I had lost all depth of field. Replacing the cap on a ballpoint pen became more than a trivial exercise.

It was a nuisance. I couldn't read the digits on my microwave timer. I couldn't see the notation on the dials of my oven, or on my clothes washer or dryer. I used to cut my own hair using a couple of mirrors. That was no longer possible. Once, when a bottle cap fell on the kitchen floor, it took me several minutes to locate it.

Near the end of September, I thought back to before my cataracts operation had taken place. I wondered then how I would feel if my eye was blind. What would be the sensation? What image would my brain "see" with that eye? How would I deal emotionally with such a development?

Well, in late September, I knew. And I was rather pleased that I had coped with the situation pretty well. I didn't feel sorry for myself. I didn't feel rage or anger. My spirits remained largely upbeat and optimistic. Of course at that time, I was quite confident sight in my left eye would be restored.

I had a bit of a battle with eye drops. It was necessary to put them in my left eye several times a day, but since I couldn't see with that eye, I had to guess where the bottle was before I squeezed it. I tried to carefully touch my eye lid with the bottle tip to position it properly, but then I had to lean my head back and squeeze the bottle gently. Several times a drop missed my eye completely. Once, I even got a drop in my other eye!

At the pre-op appointment October 8th, I had to sign a bunch of papers. One in particular was rather disconcerting. Section 5 read:

> "5. – Risk of Treatment/Procedure: Loss of eye from hemorrhage and/or infection, rejection of the transplanted tissue, retinal swelling/detachment, glaucoma, hypertension, inflammation, choroidal swelling, perforation of the eye, droopy eyelid, double vision, iritis, uncomfortable or painful eye, and/or blood blockage or stroke, on rare occasions, useful vision can be permanently lost. Rarely, the transmission or infectious disease can occur such as Hepatitis, HIV/AIDS, and syphilis, although

> the corneal donor is routinely tested for these diseases before the tissue is approved and released for transplantation. During the course of the operations, unforseen conditions may require an additional or different procedure(s) than the one originally planned. I further acknowledge that no guarantee or promises have been made to me concerning the results of my procedure of treatment."

I had to sign that page and several others. Basically, I was agreeing that if the surgeon screwed up my eyesight, I wouldn't sue.

The "After Surgery Instructions" sheet stated:

> "POSITIONING INSTRUCTIONS: LIE ON YOUR BACK WITH CHIN ELEVATED TOWARD CEILING FOR 60 MINUTES AT A TIME WITH A 30 MINUTE BREAK IN BETWEEN EACH 60 MINUTE SESSION (IT MAY HELP TO PUT A PILLOW UNDER YOUR SHOULDERS). CONTINUE FOR 4 DAYS AFTER SURGERY. SLEEP ON BACK FOR ONE WEEK."
> (Yes, the instructions were all caps.)

And of course more eye drops ($101) were prescribed. After surgery, I needed one drop three times a day. That was a big improvement compared to 9 drops per day. Thankfully, I could stop using Muro 128.

I was offered a pair of mirror, 90-degree glasses ($20 – not a bad price, I thought) so I could watch TV while my head maintained a horizontal position.

I refused at first, but then realized I probably wouldn't be able to watch TV without them, so I changed my mind and spent the twenty bucks.

I also received a brochure titled "The Path to Sight." It provided details about cornea transplants, and I was interested to note it's possible to send a letter to relatives of the person whose cornea I received during the transplant operation. I thought I might wish to write, assuming of course the surgery was successful.

At 7:30 in the morning on October 15th, I checked in at the Surgery Center for my next operation. I was the first to be led into the pre-op area and placed in a chair. I was provided with warm blankets, my blood pressure was taken, my oxygen level monitored, several probes were attached to me, an IV needle was inserted in my left arm, and my left eye was doused with a half-dozen or so drops (not all at the same time). Surprisingly, a small weight was positioned on my left eye and left there for 20 minutes. Then after a little more wait, I was wheeled into the operating room.

Again, I was aware of everything that happened. There was no tape around my forehead this time. I couldn't hear that device going on and off like I had heard the last time. The operation took only nine minutes I was told. I then had to lie motionless on my back for a half hour or so. Then, I was seated in the recovery area and given peanut butter crackers and juice. Tim had arrived to pick me up around 10:00, but I wasn't allowed to retrieve me until maybe 10:30.

I apprehensively opened my left eye. There was no improvement in my sight at all. None. If anything, sight in my left eye seemed ever so slightly worse. However, I had been warned that my sight might not return immediately after surgery. It might take several days for that to happen. I needed to be patient.

Tim and I ate supper in my apartment. I had creamed spinach and a baked potato skin. Since my head had to be in a horizontal position two-thirds of the time, I was limited in my activities. Tim completed several tasks I needed done. Then, we had lots of time to talk. That was wonderful.

I was sitting in an easy chair next to the window. I was inclined so my head could be horizontal. Both my eyes were closed. After a while, I righted my chair, placed my hand over my right eye, and cautiously opened my left eye. Much to my amazement, I saw the outside temperature reading on my weather station. It said "83 degrees." I could see the number quite clearly!

I couldn't believe it. I could see again with my left eye! I was filled with joy, excitement, and happiness! It was marvelous! It was miraculous! (The photo was taken the following day.)

Later in the evening, the image became somewhat blurry and indistinct, but I was pretty sure clarity would return. My spirits were not dimmed. Rather, they were floating on high.

The next morning (the 16th), Tim brought breakfast from First Watch for the two of us. I found I had no appetite. Tim ate his breakfast and put my eggs Benedict in the refrigerator. I remained in my easy chair as I felt a little dizzy. Fortunately, the dizziness encounters were quite brief and mild.

It was early afternoon when Tim left to drive home, and some time after that my appetite returned, so I heated up the eggs and had breakfast.

The next morning (17th), when I leaned my head back to administer an eye drop, I experienced an intense but mercifully short bout of dizziness. I spent the day trying to remain in a horizontal position for an hour out of every 90 minutes.

My post-op appointment was Wednesday, October 22nd. Vision with my left eye was still disappointing. I could only make out the big letters on the eye chart when I got to the doctor's office. Clearly, my left eye was not right.

Cornea Specialist G used his equipment to carefully examine my eye. After a brief look, he stated matter-of-factly, "You need another bubble."

Apparently, during my operation, a gas bubble had been placed inside my eye to gently nudge the new replacement cornea layer into place. And apparently, the bubble had dissipated before it could do a proper job.

I knew immediately what that meant. Somehow, another bubble would have to be inserted into my eye. And I knew there was only one way for that to happen. A needle would have to be used for that procedure.

My chin was positioned firmly on the chin rest of one of the doctor's devices. My forehead was leaning against a strip of plastic or metal in the device to keep my head in the proper orientation. The doctor's assistant was pressing my head from behind to completely immobilize it. Cornea Specialist G told me to hold onto two metal bars that were located just below the chin rest. And to hold on tightly. I did as directed.

Some contraption was used to keep my left eye open. Several drops were administered before the procedure began. Of course I couldn't see exactly what was going on.

Moments later, the device holding my eye open was removed. I asked the doctor, “Did you just insert a needle into my eye?”

“Yes,” he said, calmly.

That was one of those few instances when I really didn’t want a detailed, step-by-step description of what the doctor was doing to me. Ignorance in this case was bliss.

More drops were prescribed for me, I was instructed to remain horizontal two-thirds of the time for the next several days while I was awake, and I was sent home.

The next day, the 23rd, my sight remained a blur, but on the day after that, like magic, my sight returned. It was so wonderful! The river my apartment overlooks was a bright and brilliant blue. I kept staring at it. The color was so intense and beautiful.

Colors on my TV screen and cell phone were so rich and wonderful. I couldn’t believe it. Sight in my left eye was back and way better than I remember seeing before. On the floor, I noticed dust I didn’t know was there. On my arms and face I could see age spots I didn’t know existed. I could read the timer on my microwave unit and the clock on my stove. The act of seeing was such a joy!

If I closed my right eye, I could see some TV images that were solid blue in color. When I closed my left eye, those same images appeared green. That was strange. With my left eye closed, everything looked dim with a brown, blurry tinge. With it open, everything was alive with color.

For a few days, it seemed like something blocked the sight in my left eye every time I leaned over. It was like there was a little flap in my eye that closed and opened. Happily, that condition was short lived.

On October 29th, I again met with Cornea Specialist G. He used his equipment to gaze intently into my left eye. After just moments, he said, “That’s beautiful!”

I was elated! Apparently, the transplanted cornea layer was attached where it should be and the healing process was progressing nicely.

The results were so promising, as a matter of fact, I was permitted to schedule cataract surgery for my *right* eye for December 4th, and cornea transplant surgery for January 7th, 2026.

Maybe three or four months after that I’ll be ready to get a new prescription for my glasses, and then my sight should be better than it has been for years! No, probably decades.

Oh, happy day!