

THE PARADOX OF PROGRESS

We are living through a paradox. Ophthalmic technology has never been more advanced, yet patients' trust in the procedures we offer has rarely been more fragile. Cataract and refractive surgery outcomes have never been safer, more precise, or more predictable, yet procedural volume is declining worldwide. This issue of *CRST Global* highlights this paradox of progress by allowing leaders from around the world to address the following question: If we are doing so many things right, why does it feel as though something is missing?

I believe two perspectives are useful to this discussion: longevity and empathy.

THE LONGEVITY LENS

Refractive surgery is not cosmetic; it is preventive medicine. Good vision supports independence, cognitive function, and social connection. Poor vision can accelerate decline and increase the risk of depression, falls, and dementia. Each successful vision correction procedure does more than improve the patient's sight; it can also enhance their cognitive health, confidence, and longevity.

If refractive surgery were framed as a cognitive health measure, the conversation about its value would shift. Such a conversation depends on trust, however, the foundation of every medical decision.

THE EMPATHY DEFICIT

Many patients no longer assume that every clinic has their best interests at heart. Too often, vision correction is presented as a transaction. Efficiency has replaced empathy as a key performance metric, and no technology can compensate for that shift. Only a compassionate doctor can look a patient in the eye and say, "I know what you are afraid of. I will get you through this."

AI can improve diagnostics, workflows, and outcomes, but it cannot replace the human touch. We have built systems optimized for throughput when what patients seek is thoughtfulness and to be heard. The challenge is not to create faster systems but to slow down and listen.

TWO NEW METRICS

Two simple concepts may help refractive surgery regain its transformative role.

The first is the longevity return on vision. How many years of independence, safety, and cognitive vitality can each intervention provide? Lifetime visual quality should be assessed as rigorously as survival benefit is evaluated in cardiology.

The second concept is the emotional return on investment. How much convenience, comfort, confidence, and trust does each encounter generate? Patients rarely recall every detail of a surgical plan; they remember how well they were cared for.

The longevity return on vision and the emotional return on investment are as important to our specialty's health as any topography or biometry measurement.

REDEFINING VALUE

Price is what patients pay. Value is the life they reclaim, and it is measured in years lived fully—driving safely, reading comfortably, and recognizing faces easily. As clinician leaders, we must reclaim the narrative, stop apologizing for refractive surgery's label as an elective procedure, and communicate its essential purpose. Refractive surgery is not about vanity but vitality.

This cultural reset requires reputable global organizations such as the World College of Refractive Surgery, the Visual Freedom Foundation, and the American-European Congress of Ophthalmic Surgery to set standards, uphold our profession's purpose, and advocate for patients. These groups must remind surgeons and the public that the aim of refractive surgery is not only excellent unaided vision but also freedom—visual, personal, and cognitive. The goal is to restore what commercialization has damaged: trust.

A CALL TO PURPOSE

The roundtables in this issue of *CRST Global* highlight many parts of the equation—from ocular surface health and nuanced IOL selection to responsible AI integration and the next generation's commitment to empathy and purpose. There is a lesson to be found in each discussion.

If we lose our purpose, no technology can save us. If we restore our purpose, no obstacle can hold us back. Refractive surgery can flourish again—not because of a new femtosecond laser algorithm or a marketing campaign but because we make empathy and longevity the heart of our mission. If patients believe we care about how well and how long they live, not just how quickly we can correct their vision, they will give us their trust. ■



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