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Laser-guided cataract surgery a cut above

'No human hand can come close' to LenSx system's incisions, St. Mary's says

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THE GAZETTE

Bernadette Mayers's vision went from clear to cloudy in less than two months, and she suspected she had cataracts when she stood in front of a friend one day last fall and couldn't make out her face.

"My vision changed for the worse so fast," the 63-year-old West Island resident recalled. "It gets really bad in the glare of sunlight."

On June 27, Mayers underwent surgery at St. Mary's Hospital to remove a cataract in her left eye using new super-precise laser technology — the first such system to be offered at any public hospital in North America.

Since St. Mary's was designated as a high-volume cataract centre by the provincial government in 2002, the Côte-des-Neiges hospital has been at the forefront of advances in eye care, and so acquiring the new technology only made sense, said Dr. Conrad Kavalec, chief of ophthalmology.

"When this machine makes a cut, it's perfect," Kavalec said. "No human hand can come close."

In fact, the LenSx machine is blade-free. Under the standard method of cataract removal, an ophthalmologist uses a diamond scalpel to cut into the cornea and create a circular opening to get at the cataract-studded lens.

Under the LenSx system, a laser cuts into the cornea and creates the circular opening to reach the lens. The laser also makes four equal cuts to "crack" the lens.

Although St. Mary's already has one of the lowest complication and infection rates for cataract surgery in the country, Kavalec said the laser system will no doubt make the surgery even safer and produce better results.

The super-precise circular opening also allows an ophthalmologist to place more sophisticated replacement lenses in the eyes once the patient's cataract-studded lenses are removed. Whether employing the standard method or the LenSx machine, ophthalmologists still rely on the same type of ultrasonic instrument to disintegrate the cataract and vacuum it from the eye.

The replacement acrylic lenses, though, vary. Some are bifocal and are also aimed at treating astigmatism, eliminating the need to wear glasses. Thus, a laser-guided circular opening in the eye is ideal for such lenses, Kavalec explained.

Cataract surgery is covered under medicare, as are the most basic replacement lenses. The bifocal lenses, however, cost extra — up to $1,500.

Use of the LenSx machine costs the patient $1,100. However, patients do have the option of undergoing standard surgery at no cost under medicare. The fees collected using LenSx will go toward paying for the machine.

Since Mayers was one of the first patients to try out LenSx, she didn't have to pay for removing the cataract from the left eye. On Friday, she underwent the standard surgery under medicare to remove the cataract from her right eye.

So did she notice a difference between the two surgical methods?

"The operation was much smoother using the laser machine," she said. "And I believe my vision is also sharper with my left eye."

Mayers's ophthalmologist, Shawn Cohen, insisted that the vision in his patient's right eye will improve to the level of her left one. The point, he said, is that St. Mary's continues to use the most advanced technology for cataract surgery.

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