Making the transition to SMILE has benefited my patients and my practice
By Robert T. Lin, M.D.

I first became interested in small incision lenticule extraction (SMILE®) (Carl Zeiss Meditec AG) about four years ago. I was intrigued by the possible advantages of a procedure that provided equivalent visual outcomes to LASIK, but without its principal drawbacks in terms of flap creation and postoperative dry eye. After researching further and reading all the key peer-review studies concerning SMILE as well as discussing with many international colleagues who had already made the transition to SMILE, I became convinced that this represented a clear advance on LASIK and could serve as a catalyst to SMILE, I became convinced that this represented a procedure that provided equivalent visual outcomes to LASIK. This led me to change: the surgeon has to believe 100% in the procedure. I think that has to be the starting point for any approach, there had to be a really clear benefit to my patients, not too steep and surgeons can attain LASIK-like results very quickly. I think most surgeons will be comfortable performing SMILE once they have performed a few procedures, but will continue to get even better results with more cases if they are critically evaluating their techniques and outcomes.

However, we do not recommend performing SMILE until the surgeon has a thorough understanding of the VisuMax laser. My advice for starting with SMILE is to follow the ZEISS SMILE booking process accompanied by a regional clinical application specialist from ZEISS. This proprietary laser system can also be used to create a flap, just as in LASIK procedures, under a very low-power setting. This means that patients are much more comfortable during the procedure. I would recommend following the ZEISS onboarding process by doing about 50 cases of the flap procedure prior to starting SMILE just to become more familiar with the laser.

As part of the learning process, it is important to be diligent and to watch the videos of other surgeons as well as record your own performance. I watched every single one of my videos after my initial surgeries to see how we can possibly improve in order to get the best possible results. Technically SMILE is slightly more difficult than LASIK, but it is still much easier than cataract surgery. The key is to build trust and for the patient to have confidence that you want the best for them. At the consultation, we tell them LASIK is an excellent procedure and explain how it differs from SMILE, and the pros and cons of each approach. Patients will then usually ask which solution we offer, and we tell them LASIK is the best option for SMILE usually do so for financial reasons, as we charge slightly more for SMILE. We explain to them that this new technology required considerable investment, and that we have had to re-train our staff, create new marketing materials, and invest in new technology. This is why it is about 10% more expensive than a LASIK procedure.

The key is to build trust and for the patient to have confidence that you want the best for them. At the consultation, we tell them LASIK is an excellent procedure and explain how it differs from SMILE, and the pros and cons of each approach. Patients will then usually ask which solution we recommend and we tell them that LASIK based on our experience, the results we have obtained, and the potential advantages it offers. Now that we have performed a critical mass of procedures with SMILE the patients are posting their amazing experience and patients are asking for SMILE and not LASIK.

Moving our practice to SMILE has turned out to be an excellent decision for our patients and ultimately our business. Our results are consistently excellent with a very high percentage of patients achieving 20/20 or better postoperative vision after SMILE and our patients are very happy with the results. The other 10% percent that don’t qualify for either LASIK or SMILE, choose to undergo cataract surgery with SMILE. The other 10% percent that don’t opt for SMILE usually do so for financial reasons, as we charge slightly more for SMILE. We explain to them that this new technology required considerable investment, and that we have had to re-train our staff, create new marketing materials, and invest in new technology. This is why it is about 10% more expensive than a LASIK procedure.

I estimate that SMILE has increased our revenue by at least 20%. However, the real reward is seeing how happy our patients are after their SMILE surgery. Our patients can now have excellent refractive surgery with less dry eye symptoms post-operatively in my clinics. The results are also very predictable and stable over the long term as borne out by studies in the peer-reviewed literature. Our LASIK enhancement rate is about 1% which is typically better than SMILE touch-ups is only about 0.2%. As word spreads about the visual outcomes we have been achieving, we have seen a definite increase in demand.

MAKING THE CHANGE
The refractive surgery market in the United States is LASIK dominated, and there is very little awareness of SMILE or any other alternative options. From my perspective, there had to be a really clear benefit to my patients in making the transition to a SMILE-dominated practice. I think that has to be the starting point for any change: the surgeon has to believe 100% in the procedure and have total confidence in the visual outcomes it will deliver for his or her patients.

REAPING THE DIVIDENDS
We were also able to introduce SMILE gradually, launching it first in our northern California office where the LASIK volume was not as high. Having observed the excellent outcomes and positive patient feedback we also incorporated it in our southern California practice. Confidence in marketing and educational materials to staff training and customer care. This is where ZEISS was very supportive, helping with all the key aspects of practice development including staff training, customer service and marketing in order to ensure that SMILE was fully integrated into our practice and that everyone understood their role in relation to this new technology. The ZEISS Practice Development Consulting (PDC) was very beneficial in our marketing strategy and also in drawing up a business plan to facilitate regional educational events in both northern and southern California for optometrists. This led to many educational events over the last few years to include educational evenings, continuing education events, multiple optometrists undergoing the procedure with SMILE themselves, and an increase in overall practice revenue through new co-management leads and treated cases.

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DR. ROBERT T. LIN founded iQ Laser Vision in 1999 and has successfully performed more than 60,000 refractive procedures over the past 20 years. Dr. Lin received his undergraduate education in UC Berkeley and medical training at UCLA. He completed his ophthalmology residency at the prestigious Jules Stein Eye Institute at UCLA where he is currently an Assistant Clinical Professor.

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