

It's probably the most terrified she's ever been, but Vicky Powell's fear wasn't going to get the better of her vanity as she underwent laser eye surgery

Let's not mince words: when it comes to eyes, everyone's squeamish. Mention laser eye surgery to anyone with vision problems, and they get very worried indeed. How many times before my surgery did I hear the words, "They're your eyes. What if it goes wrong? You've only got one pair!"

I'd be lying if I said the same thought didn't cross my mind when I decided to correct 20 years of short-sightedness – but I'd also be telling porkies if I didn't admit that vanity became a stronger determining factor than fear.

growing cosmetic procedure, with between 200,000 and 300,000 people a year having the operation. That makes it big business, and it's an increasingly competitive market on the high street. However, Mr Pillai's practice is small and highly focused on patient care. Believe it or not, it's extremely rare in many practices for a patient to meet their surgeon before an operation; at Advance Visioncare, they insist on it.

Every patient has an initial two-hour consultation. The eye tests for assessing suitability for treatment are carried out by an optometrist, and they're rigorous. Around 30% of would-be patients never make it past this initial stage, at which point the consultation fee is refunded. Thin corneas or "lazy eyes" are among the main reasons for refusal, but once your suitability has been determined, you meet up with Mr Pillai, a consultant refractive surgeon, who carries out further tests and talks you through the procedure.

"People's main anxiety when they meet me is, naturally, 'Will I go blind?' I've never had anyone go blind. The risk of blindness is

Advance Visioncare is much more expensive than many of the options available on the high street. An operation costs between £2200-£3100, but you're also paying for an intensive aftercare package. Following surgery, I returned the next day for another examination (those living outside London are put up in an hotel overnight, inclusive in the fee) and to have the contact lens – it's placed over the eye after surgery to help the healing process – removed. But aftercare at Advance Visioncare also means check-ups with Mr Pillai one week, six weeks, six months and one year later. If you're not able to come back to his surgery, he has a group of recommended optometrists to whom he'll refer you. A few days after my operation one of my eyes began to hurt slightly, so knowing I'd be seeing Mr Pillai again was reassuring. He's absolutely passionate about aftercare.

"The aftercare is important, as most of the problems can happen in the first week," he says. "Complications or side effects need to be diagnosed and treated early to prevent long-

surgeons tell him of doing 14 or 15 patients a day, one straight after the other. They'll never see the patient again, and there'll be little or no post-operational consultations. Nor will they get their eyes redone if they need to.

"In the multi-chain clinics, if the patient develops problems, the optometrists might not be able to diagnose or communicate with the operating surgeon. Other surgeons working for the company won't take responsibility for somebody else's mistakes – sometimes the operating surgeon isn't even in the country. The surgeons are hired from Europe for a cheaper price. The businessmen treat everything as a commodity, from patients to surgeons."

He firmly believes in the expertise of the surgeon, and that a patient needs to be given all the facts before making a decision. He encourages those who want surgery to ask as many questions as they need to during the consultation.

Of course, there are some necessary restrictions. All those wanting surgery must be over 21, and surgery will be refused to anyone with any

condition or using medication that can affect corneal healing or cause very dry eyes. Among these are patients on steroids, anti-cancer drugs, those with high blood pressure, uncontrolled diabetes, arthritis or on-going eye herpes.

One vital criterion that determines whether Mr Pillai will operate is an individual's expectations. He'll ask what you expect from the operation, and those who want absolute perfection might be refused. Vanity aside, my main criterion was to be able to see well enough to drive without glasses or lenses. And apart from short-sightedness, Mr Pillai also now works on correcting long-sightedness, as many people over 45 will invariably need reading glasses.

But I bet there're two things you really want to know. Am I blind? And did it hurt? The answer's "No" and "No". I was able to drive within two days, with my sight improving constantly in the days immediately after treatment. The eye itself is anaesthetised during the operation with drops, so you don't feel any of the procedure as it takes place, and while the clamps

used to hold open the eye are a little uncomfortable, the surgery is so quick, you're soon unclamped.

I was absolutely terrified, but the Valium you're given soon takes hold. Believe me, you forget all about the fear when you walk outside the clinic, having left your glasses behind in a bowl used to collect unwanted specs for those in developing countries who see as badly as you did two hours earlier. ■

For more information, visit www.advancevisioncare.co.uk. *Plano Scan LASIK treatment costs from £1150 per eye, with Wavefront LASIK from £1550 per eye. Advance Visioncare offers a financial care package where the cost can be paid monthly. GT readers can get a 10% discount before January 31st by calling 0800 652 4878 and quoting "Gay Times". For further testimonials on treatments with Mr Pillai, log onto www.lasik-eyes.co.uk/surgeons, where you can read postings from people who've had surgery, along with their independent ratings*

EYES RIGHT

Terrible, isn't it? But I'd been told I couldn't wear contact lenses forever, and that in the next couple of years I'd have to start wearing glasses daily. While some people wear specs well and feel comfortable in them, I never have. Unless you know the feeling yourself, it's hard to understand how quickly they can alter your confidence in public. As soon as I put on glasses, I became Velma from *Scooby Doo*, and nothing will change that.

For a week before consultation and before the operation itself you have to wear your glasses, which motivated me even more to see the surgery through. People have the operation for many reasons according to my surgeon, Chindambara Pillai.

Chindambara runs the Advance Visioncare surgery on Harley Street and most of his patients arrive full of nerves. Jovial and friendly, he puts visitors at ease but, jovial and friendly aside, what you really want to know is just how good he is. It's reassuring to know that he's done 20,000 successful laser operations in his 20-year career as an eye specialist, including his own daughter's eyes.

Corrective eye surgery is the UK's fastest-

almost nil," he says.

And while the benefits are made clear, he and his team of optometrists also make the risks explicit – from under- and over-correction (where the eye improves too much) and reduced night vision to some less-common complications. Sometimes a person will need to be retreated, but this is very rare; Mr Pillai has had to redo surgery a second time on only eight patients in the eight years he's been carrying out corrective surgery.

He performs all the operations himself, and will explain the equipment used. My particular laser treatment was LASIK, using state-of-the-art Wavefront technology from Bausch & Lomb, which is serviced three times a year. Laser treatment is thought to be much safer and more precise than other forms of corrective surgery – and this is precisely what you want to hear. All patients are given detailed literature at their consultation about what the process involves and, after reading it and asking Mr Pillai any unanswered questions you may have, you're asked to sign an equally detailed consent form. At no time do you feel you're going into it with your eyes shut – if you'll pardon the expression.

term problems." Patients are given antibiotic and anti-inflammatory drops to take for one week after surgery, and drops which act as artificial "tears" to moisten the eyes need to be administered for three months.

Mr Pillai operates three days a week and does up to six operations in one day, but given the surgery itself takes only 36 seconds per eye, this is a remarkably modest amount of patients; something that he prides himself on. He pours disdain on what he sees as the "quicker, faster, make-more-money" mentality of many of the companies offering surgery.

"Here, you're paying for a surgeon's time and to be looked after," he says. "There are no sales people. You either want it done or you don't. You're going to get professional aftercare. We could get a lot more people in a day, but how is that going to affect the aftercare? We run this place medically, not as a big business."

He's particularly scornful of the special offers and hard sell foisted on customers. "Buy one, get one free! Where a person has it done and then their partner gets it done for free. It's ridiculous," he says with great force and indignation at one of the gimmicks he'd been told about. His fellow eye

