LASIK Advertising 2000—Are We Putting Our Wallets in Front of Our Wisdom?

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When was the last time you flicked on your car radio, only to hear that one of your colleagues had been proclaimed a “pioneer,” “leading surgeon,” or “world-renowned expert” in LASIK surgery? Did you discover that he or she “has performed thousands of successful vision correction surgeries” right there in your home town, and—most remarkable—was the first to do LASIK in your region? Did you find out that your colleague is now a prominent member or director of some professional society you have never heard of, and has “awards and publications that are indeed impressive and too numerous to list?” Have you sought refuge in a different station, only to hear another advertisement trumpeting that the “XYZ laser center has some of the finest surgeons in the world,” and assuring you that “truly, no other center can offer more skill and experience, because there is no substitute for quality and there is no higher quality anywhere?”

As these commercials conclude, do you realize that the last time you talked to the world’s finest and most experienced refractive surgeon, he or she had no idea what a microkeratome was, and couldn’t even spell keratomileusis? No wonder, as you pulled into your driveway at the end of a long day, you found yourself thinking, “It certainly is a wonderful thing that we live in a country where freedom of speech is a protected and inalienable right…”

In a nation where retail consumer advertising routinely utilizes hyperbole and superlatives to achieve its goals, it is not surprising that such tactics have found their way into our profession. But the recent neoplastic proliferation of refractive surgery advertising suggests that as ophthalmic physicians—trustworthy arbiters of the truth for our patients—we have lost our way.

The preceding anecdotes exemplify what is wrong with refractive surgery advertising today, but contemporary medical advertising issues are not limited to misrepresenting professional credentials. Promotions involving “lifetime” or “money back” guarantees are also misleading. Although it may be possible to refund a consumer’s money or provide a replacement if a television or a computer fails, we cannot promise patients their vision back if they are not satisfied. Technology is a wonderful thing, but is still not infallible when it comes to repairing the human body; there are no fully reliable warranties for surgery.

As the refractive surgery market becomes more competitive, it is inevitable that advertising will exert an increasingly powerful influence on patient behavior and will become an effective vehicle for growing refractive practices. Aggressive, exaggerated, untrue, and misleading advertising is well accepted in the commercial consumer marketplace, but is inappropriate for medicine because it can mislead patients and leave them more confused and vulnerable. Even if information is factually accurate, short commercials that forcefully communicate only the wonderful attributes of an elective medical procedure, such as refractive or cosmetic surgery, will create unrealistic expectations for individual patients.

A 1982 Federal Trade Commission ruling approved the use of medical advertising, but only when information is accurate and not misleading. Ethical advertising, however, means more. As physicians and professionals, we have an obligation to put our patients’ interests ahead of our own, and that may mean conservatively communicating our credentials and the efficacy of our procedures.

We physicians must balance the reality of economic practice pressures with our patients’ need to trust us as their impartial advocate. Ironically, it may be that trust which has allowed refractive surgery to flourish. As the 21st century approaches, maintaining that trust may be our greatest challenge. If we mutate from physicians to salespeople, if we transform our helping profession into a mass marketing machine, if we replace patient counseling with personal cajoling, we betray the foundations of our ophthalmic profession and void our social contract with those whom we profess to serve.