**Survey charts evolution in French practice habits**

Dermot McGrath in Paris

The steady growth in popularity of the femtosecond laser for flap creation, a marked increase in presbyopia surgery and the strong preference for topical anaesthesia in cataract procedures are among some of the more interesting findings of the latest survey of French ophthalmologists conducted by Richard Gold MD.

"A number of issues stand out in this year's survey. First, the IntraLase laser continues to make progress at the expense of mechanical microkeratomes. We are also witnessing a clear increase in presbyopia surgery and consequently an increase in the use of multifocal IOls. It is also interesting to note that topical anaesthesia, with or without intracameral lidocaine, is now more popular than peribulbar anaesthesia which has declined steadily in recent years," said Dr Gold, former head of the Department of Ophthalmology at the Cognacq-Jay Hospital, Paris and now in private practice at Le Raincy, France.

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In the tenth of his annual surveys of French practices in ophthalmic surgery, Dr Gold collected 1,093 responses to an anonymous questionnaire sent to almost 5,000 French ophthalmologists. The response rate of 22 per cent was slightly less than last year but is still a pretty good return, noted Dr Gold. As well as providing valuable insights into trends and developments in clinical practice, Dr Gold's questionnaire serves as a useful barometer of the current wellbeing of French ophthalmology in general.

The proportion of French ophthalmologists with a low volume of cataract surgery continues to decline, with 11 per cent performing fewer than 100 cataract surgeries per year, down from 22 per cent in 1998 and 15 per cent in 2002. The proportion performing between 100 and 199 procedures annually increased to 24 per cent, while the proportion performing 200 to 300 per year decreased slightly to around 23 per cent. At the high volume end of the spectrum, those treating 500 or more patients annually remained steady at just under 17 per cent for 2006.

As elsewhere in the world, the size of the incisions used by French ophthalmic surgeons for cataract surgery has continued to decrease in recent years. In 1998, 28 per cent of respondents said they used incisions greater than 4.0mm compared to just 1.6 per cent in 2006, while those using incisions between 2.8mm and 3.2mm jumped to 65 per cent from 21 per cent in 2000. Of 19 per cent of respondents said that they habitually used incisions of less than 2.8mm, compared to less than one per cent in 2000.

French surgeons continue to prefer temporal incisions (36 per cent), followed by oblique (26 per cent) and 12 o'clock (23 per cent). The proportion of respondents who always use sutures during cataract surgery continues its decline from about two-thirds in 1998 to less than one-third (27 per cent) in 2006, while those who never use sutures increased from 18 per cent in 1998 to almost 58 per cent in 2006.

Dr Gold also noted that the use of injectors for cataract surgery has shown a strong increase in recent years, with 92 per cent of respondents using injectors in 2006 compared to 88 per cent in 2005 and just 21 per cent in 1998. DuoVisc continues to be the most popular viscoelastic in France, followed by DiscoVisc which appears for the first time at 11 per cent, and the remainder fairly evenly distributed among Amvisc, Healon, Biocorneal and Ophthalin.

Ambulatory cataract surgery continues to remain the norm in France, as elsewhere in the industrialised world, with over 66 per cent of surgeons performing treatments on an outpatient basis.

In terms of anaesthesia, the trend towards greater use of topical anaesthesia continues apace, up to 33 per cent for 2006 compared to 28 per cent for the year before and just 14 per cent in 1998. Another 21 per cent use topical anaesthesia plus intracameral lidocaine, while a decreasing number of respondents (31 per cent) use peribulbar anaesthesia, down from a high of 75 per cent in 2000.

The most widely used IOls are foldable acrylics, with hydrophobic acrylics (69 per cent) slightly more popular than hydrophilic models (59 per cent). The years of Dr Gold's survey charts the steady decline of silicon and PMMA implants, down from 31 per cent in 1998 to only five per cent in 2006. The growing trend towards a merging of cataract and refractive surgery is also reflected in the outcomes of Dr Gold's survey, with multifocals now being used by over 21 per cent of respondents in 2006 compared to just 13 per cent in 2004.

As with cataract surgery, only a small proportion of respondents perform refractive surgery at a high volume. Only four per cent of respondents performed more than 300 refractive procedures per year and about 11 per cent performed 100 to 199 per year. Among the respondents, 99 per cent treat myopia, 89 per cent treat astigmatism and 79 per cent treat hyperopia. Presbyopic treatments are also gaining in popularity, up to 27 per cent in 2006 compared to 19 per cent in 2004 and less than eight per cent in 2002.

The latest survey also continues to highlight the French preference for PRK over LASIK in the treatment of myopia. In the 2006 survey, almost 76 per cent expressed a preference for PRK as their treatment of choice compared to 68 per cent for LASIK. This compared to 76 per cent for PRK and 77 per cent for LASIK in 2004, the only year when LASIK outstripped PRK in the decade covered by Dr Gold's surveys.

Only a small proportion of respondents used refractive surgery for the treatment of presbyopia, although such procedures continue to be more widely practised than they were in 1998 when the surveys began. This year's survey also marks the first time that presbyopic lens exchange has become the favoured technique in the treatment of presbyopia (15 per cent), followed by PresbyLASIK (12 per cent) as the next most widely used procedure.

The Bausch & Lomb Technolas (36 per cent) and Nidek (30 per cent) lasers continue to dominate the French market, although Zeiss Meditec has doubled its usage from five per cent in 2005 to 11 per cent in 2006. The statistics for microkeratomes also charts the steady rise of the IntraLase laser in France, with 16 per cent now using the femtosecond laser for flap creation compared to just three per cent in 2004. While the Hansatome is still the preferred microkeratome for 51 per cent of respondents in this year's survey, it is still a sharp reduction from its all-time high of 88 per cent in 2004.

As well as practice trends, Dr Gold's survey also takes an interesting snapshot of the current health and morale of the ophthalmic profession in France. One worrying trend is the continued 'greying' of the ranks of French ophthalmologists: only one per cent of respondents to the survey are under 35 years of age (compared to 11 per cent in 1999), 53 per cent are aged between 45 and 54 and 35 per cent are aged between 55 and 64 years.

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