

CATARACT SURGERY

By James Collins

Back in 1992, I had to have cataract surgery at Mass Eye and Ear. The process at that time was very advanced but very different from that practiced in 2012. A cataract is an opaque change to the lens, which is in the front end of the eye immediately behind the cornea. Twenty years ago the process was to surgically enter the eye, extract the hardened lens and replace it with a plastic lens that had two stainless steel loops on either side to keep it from moving. A very safe process, it was the most employed surgery in the medical industry at that time.

I arrived early in the morning was put into a medical robe and placed on a gurney. About 75 others and I in groups rolled through an assembly line procedure on the main floor of the hospital. At each location, they asked the same question, "What eye is being operated on today?" The patient gave the answer; they verified with the bracelet on their wrist and moved on through the procedure. At one location, the woman to my left answered incorrectly, and despite all her protestations, she disappeared off the assembly line and we never heard of her again.

At the fourth location, they wheeled me into a room where there were a few nurses and doctors and they were busy wiring my chest and my head to an electronic monitoring system. An Asian doctor came over and said,

"Mister Collins you are not to get anxious. This is purely a test to see if you have any reactions to the anesthesia. I am going to give you just a little bit of the anesthesia. You will go to sleep for less than a minute. You will then wake up and we will forward you to the operating room. Here you go."

I woke up to a chaotic scene. Two nurses were lying across my body trying to hold me down while the Doctor was shouting,

"Mister Collins, Mister Collins you have got to wake-up."

Groggily I said, "I'm awake. What happened? Why are the nurses lying across me?"

"Mister Collins we gave you a little bit of the anesthesia and you went to sleep. Then a nurse came over to you and you took a swing at her. We had to restrain you and try to bring you around."

"Doctor did anyone touch me while I was asleep?"

"Yes she came over to check your pulse."

"Never do that while I'm asleep. You saw my reaction."

"Mister Collins you are a crazy person. We cannot have you swinging at the doctor while he is working on your eyes. We cannot give you an anesthesia of this type. You will have to go through the operation wide-awake. We will give you a local anesthesia and you will have to stay very still."

They wheeled me into surgery and covered me with a sheet, which has a four square inch hole in it. This covered my face while the hole exposed the eye they are going to work on. Since the eye, which is covered, is my good eye, I can see nothing. There are a nurse and two doctors involved. The surgeon and the doctor who acted as my coordinator for all my tests were the key medical personnel.

I was chatting with the doctor, asking some questions, when I was given an admonition.

"Mister Collins you will not be able to speak during the operation. When you talk, your eye flutters and we cannot have the eye having any motion while we are using sharp tools. Therefore from here on in you will not say another word."

During the 45 minutes of the procedure the doctors talked about ballgames, family picnics, parties, all kinds of social events. I heard them indicate that the lens was installed and they starting suturing. Then the surgeon said,

"Oh, oh."....My heart went up to my throat.

"Nurse, I need a 'grandma flats'.

I heard the nurse's footsteps cross the room. I heard the main door open and close. I could feel the air pressure change. It seemed forever until she returned.

"Here it is Dr. It was in the next operating room."

Less than a minute later the doctor said, "Everything is complete and everything is fine."

"Mister Collins everything went well."

"Mister Collins are you all right?"

"What's wrong with him?"

My doctor said, "Mister Collins you can speak now."

“What was the ‘Oh oh’ about?”

"Oh I forgot you were awake for this operation. Usually our patients are sound asleep. There is a tool I like to use to close after the procedure. We receive packages of medical instruments from various manufacturers. This particular manufacturer did not include that tool so we sent the nurse to get it from a different package."

The doctors said that he would make it a point not to say “Oh oh” while anybody was still on the table as I explained what it did to my blood pressure. All went well and 20 years later, I went through the procedure with the other eye but it was a totally different and uneventful experience.

THE END