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Editorial

Excimer laser for anterior cornea

The paper by Gartry, Kerr Muir, and Marshall in this number of the journal is the first publication of the results of treating pathological conditions of the anterior cornea with the excimer laser. The authors have shown convincingly that such conditions can be treated safely and effectively, and they are to be congratulated on their thoroughly planned and conscientiously conducted research. However, cases suitable for this treatment are relatively few and would hardly justify the substantial investment which is being directed towards the development of the excimer laser for ophthalmic use. The drive behind this development is the possibility of using the excimer laser for photorefractive keratoplasty. That the excimer laser is an effective and above all safe method for refractive surgery remains to be proved, and it is to be hoped that the long-term, carefully monitored, prospective studies which are needed will not be pre-empted by its premature wider use for photorefractive keratoplasty. Nevertheless its potential application in refractive surgery raises important issues which ophthalmologists should consider, and it would seem desirable that the debate should take place before rather than after the method becomes widely available.

Important economic considerations may influence priorities for the allocation of health care resources in Britain, particularly with the introduction of the internal market in the National Health Service. For example, how should ophthalmologists respond to pressures from health service managers to engage in work which might generate income though possibly at the expense of ophthalmological skill being directed to other needs. Should this technology be available to ophthalmologists only, or should other professionals engage in its use? This matter is already a live issue in the United States.

The College of Ophthalmologists should be encouraged to take the lead in addressing these matters so that ophthalmologists can be helped to form their own opinions and appropriate advice can be given to those bodies who look to the college for responsible and considered professional advice. Failure to act now runs the risk of the inevitable debate degenerating into an unhelpful contest dominated by those whose opinions are dictated either by self-righteousness or by self-interest.

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