

It has now been approximately four months since my Glaucoma Surgery and Dr. Cohen had asked me to write a letter about what this experience has been like for me so that other patients who are about to begin this journey can read this and gain a little comfort and knowledge in what to expect.

I feel that it is important to first explain my personal situation and how I got here. I was born with a condition called Reiger's Syndrome. This condition is so rare that almost every, non-eye, doctor I have seen through my life had never even heard of it. In my case this syndrome caused me to develop Glaucoma in the womb. Immediately after my birth my father had noticed that my eyes were cloudy and alerted the doctors. It was at that time that my family and I met Dr. X who took over my case. Through various examinations it was discovered that I had this syndrome and Glaucoma. My parents were told at that time that I was virtually blind. As I matured my fortune was revealed and it was discovered that this was not the case. In fact, not only did I have vision, but I had perfect vision. Dr. X continued to treat me through my adolescence with eye drops and a special mix of Diamox, as my system could not tolerate the adult medication. After several years of treatment my Glaucoma had disappeared completely. I was followed by Dr. X annually even after the disease disappeared just to make sure things continued to stay clear. During a routine exam around the time that I hit puberty it was discovered that the Glaucoma had returned. I was again treated with drops and monitored with quarterly exams. This became a very routine event for me. Every four months I would go to the Montreal General Hospital to see my doctor. He would check my pressure and tell me to come back in 4 months. Every so often I would have pictures of my eyes taken, visual field tests performed, and even my drops changed as my body developed immunities to certain medications after such prolonged use. This was my routine and I never really paid much attention to it, or entertained the thought that things could change. In fact I found going to the doctor to be quite a nuisance and even comical. You can picture a waiting room filled with people where the average age was over 70, and then me a very young man. I always chuckled as the elderly patients quietly pointed at me and whispered to each other wondering what I was doing there, I actually felt kind of like a quasi celebrity if you could imagine that. Anyhow, my routine played out through my teens, my twenties, and into my thirties. About 3 years ago I was back at my quarterly appointment when my doctor told me that my pressure was suddenly up, way up. He told me that he hadn't seen my pressure that high since I was a little boy. At this point we started trying any and all treatments that were available to us. I was already on all the eye drops that were available to us. First he tried the laser treatment which had no effect, then he tried me on one type of pill which was unsuccessful, then he put me on the maximum dosage of Diamox. It was at this time that he told me that I might be heading for surgery. To my delight the Diamox had great results so my dosage was adjusted downwards. At my next appointment my pressure was back up again, so he put me back on the maximum dosage which, unfortunately, showed no improvement. At this point Dr. X sat me down and told me that he was going to try the laser again but after that treatment we were out of options. He explained to me that the reason he is trying so hard to stretch this out is because the surgery has greater success in older people and so he was trying to put the surgery off as long as possible, but it was now looking inevitable. Of course, as he predicted, the laser didn't work and I was immediately referred to Dr. Cohen.

This all has a profound effect on my sense of security. I always considered myself to be a stable minded person and while I was a natural worrier since my infancy I was still an adventurous person who enjoyed experiencing all things. This emergency situation and unknown outcome has actually transformed me into a hyper-sensitive person who combats anxieties on a daily basis, and as my situation continued to decline I found myself facing very dark times. My feeling of youthful invincibility was ripped away from me, and for the first time in my life I was starting to try to come to terms with the possibility of going blind. For me this was a fate worse than death. And I know that any visually impaired person would probably tell you that they have found ways to adapt and have a very fulfilling life, but I couldn't see this as a possibility for me. After 33 years how could I lose my sight? How would I be able to live, how would I get from place to place, how would I complete even the most basic task? Most importantly, I would never be able to see my beautiful wife again, I would never be able to see my daughters again (5 & 7). We had been planning to take our first family vacation together and go to Disneyland just 4 months after I found out that I needed this surgery. This news absolutely devastated me, I was terrified. Being the worst case scenario person that I am I started practicing for blindness, walking around my house with my eyes closed. I walked into walls, I crashed into doors, and I banged my head on open cupboards, it was a nightmare come to life for me. I truly wanted to crawl into a dark corner and cry and hope the ceiling would just fall on me and end it. I have to explain that while Dr. X is an absolute hero to me, and he has helped to take care of my eyes for 35 years, he is what I call a "worst case scenario" kind of person, and his demeanor has contributed greatly to my lack of feeling safe. I tend to look to those around me for assurance and the read I was getting off of my doctor was that this surgery was a "hail Mary pass", a shot in the dark, and this partnered with my own tendencies contributed greatly to my feeling of panic and anxiety. While I care for him deeply, and owe him a debt that I can never possibly repay, our personalities just aren't a good match.

I was contacted by Dr. Cohen's office the very same afternoon that Dr. X told me I required the surgery. I was shocked at how fast this was all playing out as I really didn't realize how imminent the danger was. I figured that I would get a call in a week or two, and they would book the surgery for 6-8 months later, the standard practice. I was really taken aback to get a call within 2 hours of leaving Dr. X's office and then to find out that they wanted to perform my surgery by the end of the following week. As long as I live I will never forget my first visit to Dr. Cohen's office. I was so scared, so hyper aware of my surroundings that I remember everything with crystal clear detail. I remember the face of the door man in the lobby who seemed to be giving me his condolences without ever opening his mouth or making so much as a facial gesture. I remember the old fashioned elevator dials telling me what floor the elevator was on. That really sticks out for me because I remember watching those dials and praying in my head that the elevator would never come down. And as slow as the needle approached 1, it seemed to me like it was moved at supersonic speed. I remember getting off the elevator on the 3rd floor, and the medical smell in the hallway seemed so thick that it made me nauseous. As I approached the door the numbers 322 just looked so big and overpowering. I remember that my hand was trembling so bad that my wife had to turn the handle to Dr. Cohen's office door. I remember talking to the reception lady and she must have thought me so weak because I was so intimidated that I must have said "please" and "thank you" five hundred times, thinking in the back of my mind that perhaps they would excuse me from this fate for being such a nice person. I know this must all sound ridiculous,

but I remember these feeling, thoughts, and emotions like this occurred just this morning. I sat down and waited to meet Dr. Cohen and this was perhaps the period where time moved the slowest. I was so intimidated to meet him. I had only had one surgery before and it was to remove my tonsils and the surgeon was a family member (by marriage not blood). I had heard so many stories about how little “bed side manor” top surgeons had, how little compassion they seemed to show for their patients. For them a patient was like an order number and this was their business. After a brief wait Dr. Cohen emerged from his examining room, went over to get the file, turned to look at me put out his hand and said “hi Sean, it is an honor to meet you”. To this day I don’t know how he knew who I was, maybe I was the only new patient in there, maybe he saw the fear on my face, I don’t know, but I swear to you on my good name that I can put a pin on this exact point in the linear time line of my life as a Glaucoma patient and label that as a moment that changed everything for me. Suddenly I started to feel that there was a chance that I might be ok. Dr. Cohen invited me in and explained to me that Dr. X had fully briefed him on my history and the uniqueness of my case and Dr. Cohen then said to me that “it is an honor to be the one who gets to help (me) overcome this problem and get on with (my) life”. I don’t know how I contained my emotions but I wanted to throw my arms around him and just hug him and thank him. I will tell you that Dr. Cohen is a surprise. His reputation is that he is a surgeon beyond compare, and this reputation encompasses both Canada and the USA. I know this because my father is a Governor at the Montreal General Hospital, and as soon as Dr. X told us that he was the one who was going to perform my surgery my father used his contacts to check him out. The reason I say this is because it is shocking that a surgeon of Dr. Cohen’s caliber, and trust me he knows how good he is, can be so compassionate towards his patients. There was nothing businesslike about my meetings with Dr. Cohen. There was no doubt anywhere in my mind that Dr. Cohen understood not only what I was going through, but understood the effect that my journey to this point had taken on my life and me psyche. So many doctors miss the big picture, it’s not just about treating the disease or condition, the doctor must also treat the person and the mind. When it comes to surgery a patient is handing over the absolute ultimate trust to their doctor, they are literally handing their life and safety over to another human being that they barely know and telling them that their fate is in their hands. I think it makes such an immeasurable difference when a doctor can establish a relationship of real trust and compassion with their patient. Dr. Cohen told me in one of our earlier appointments that he considers all his patients to be his friends and that by thinking about his patients this way it forces him to perform to the highest level of his talents every time. I can tell you, that as much as I thought initially that this was just talk, it wasn’t. It was absolutely true and I now feel the exact same way. It is not my intention to turn this essay into an aggrandizing portrait of Dr. Cohen, and I know that’s not what he wants, but I find it is so important to explain all this because who Dr. Cohen is as a person is such a big part of the medicine he provided me. It allowed me to face my surgery with positivity, optimism, and hope rather than pessimism, doom, and feelings of dread. I walked in to our first appointment trembling and hunched over and I walked out feeling confident and walking tall, it takes a very special person to give that to a patient. Throughout all my prep appointments Dr. Cohen talked to me so respectfully and gave me so much knowledge and information. When January 6 came along, I knew practically every step that I was about to undertake. I remember walking through the main doors of the hospital with my wife and my parents and looking at them and saying to them that I was indeed scared, but nearly as much as I should have been. This had everything to do with the relationship I had established with Dr. Cohen and the

knowledge he had given me. Dr. Cohen told me that throughout the surgery, even though I would not be able to see anything I would never feel alone. He would talk to me throughout and explain everything he was going to do before he did it. Dr. Cohen assured me that there would be no pain during his surgery and he delivered splendidly on that promise. Dr. Cohen even called me at home, on his own time, on the afternoon of my surgery and over my first weekend to check on me to see how I was doing. I have never heard from anyone about having a doctor do this before.

After the surgery can also be a frightening time. It is a mixed bag of emotions because on the one hand I was overcome with a tremendous sense of relief that my surgery was over and behind me. Yet on the other hand, I couldn't really see much of anything, so there was really an uneasiness within me about whether or not what was happening to me was normal. I could see much of anything but what I could see was extremely distorted. My colors were off, and it felt like someone had poured a clear gel right onto my eyeball. Again, though I found comfort from Dr. Cohen as I was seeing him every second day after my surgery, and he seemed alarmed by nothing. I will say that being prepared for the recovery phase was crucial for me. Knowing that I was going to be on the sofa for my recovery, and also be limited in sight I prepared ahead of time with my wife. We prepared things that I would be able to do to pass the time. I highly recommend doing this, as this also helped my anxiety leading up to the surgery by taking off the table the worry about not knowing what I was going to do to pass the time. With the way my mind works, lying on the sofa and staring at the walls is disastrous. The worst thing I can do is just lie there and let my mind wonder because that is when I tend to let my anxieties get away from me, and in this case with not knowing what was going on with my body, to have done so would have been very counter-productive to the mental portion of my recovery. For the next three months I saw Dr. Cohen regularly as he monitored my recovery. At first we saw each other 3 times each week, then twice, then once. In fact, against all odds, this past March Dr. Cohen gave me the all clear to take my family trip to Disneyworld.

I find myself searching for words to describe the emotions that I experienced on this trip. These were easily the best 2 weeks of my life and not just because of where I was and who I was with but because of the gift that I had received. After Dr. X broke the news to me, I truly felt that this "dream" trip would never come to pass. So everything we did, everything I saw felt like a real gift. I was able to enjoy my family and this trip in a way that most people cannot. The level of perspective I had can only be gained through experience. I cannot possibly underplay the involvement of G-d in my life and that he has blessed me many times over with good fortune and the ability to overcome great hardship and sorrow, I also know that sometimes you need someone to help deliver the gifts that G-d provides, and for me that person is Dr. Cohen. As much as I tell him, he will never know the meaning of what he has given me, the value of the freedom he has provided for me. Every time I looked at the ocean or the Magic Kingdom, every time I gaze upon my wife, every time I look at my 2 greatest gifts from heaven, my daughters, I am looking through my eyes with the sight that Dr. Cohen helped to give me. To simply say thank you is not enough, there is nothing in this world that I wouldn't do for Dr. Cohen if it were in my power. It's funny what sticks with you as you go through life. This past November when Dr. Cohen and I met for the first time he said to me "think of how nice it will be to sit on a beach, wherever you take your vacation, and be able to say that I used to have Glaucoma". Well this past March I got to do

that very thing, and as I watched countless people pass me at Disneyworld and at the beach I couldn't help but feel that they didn't know how truly lucky they all are. Unfortunately, it takes perspective to reach this kind of thinking, and this is something I now have and I am thankful for that perspective because it helps me to really value even the smallest moments. It is amazing how differently I evaluate things today than I did four months ago. While I am still not absolutely 100% I am progressing regularly and I am thankful for this experience and who it has helped me become.