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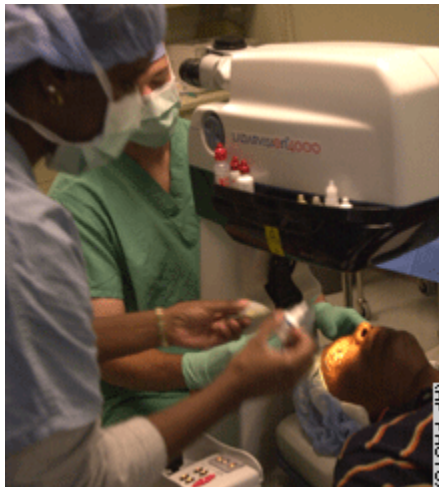
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# HEALTH

## Iraq vets flock to laser eye clinic

### 26,000 have had surgery to help see battlefield better

Tuesday, September 28, 2004 Posted: 9:51 AM EDT (1351 GMT)



Maj. Adam Buchanan performs corrective eye surgery on Sgt. Maj. Kurt Pinero at the Warfighter Refractive Eye Surgery Clinic at Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

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**FORT CAMPBELL, Kentucky (AP) -- Command Sgt. Maj. Kurt Pinero looked up from the operating table after laser eye surgery and could already make out the pictures on the television screen across the room.**

"It was amazing," said the 45-year-old Iraq war veteran. "It was the first time I could see that far since I was a child."

After months in the Iraqi desert fumbling with dusty contacts, smudged eyeglasses and prescription goggles, soldiers by the thousands are flocking to get refractive eye surgery. And the Army's picking up the tab.

"Our work load and number of patients has gone through the roof," said Maj. Glenn Sanford of the two-year-old Warfighter Refractive Eye Surgery Clinic at Fort Campbell's Blanchfield Army Hospital.

About 26,000 soldiers have undergone the surgery at Army clinics nationwide since it was first made available at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, four years ago.

More than 9,000 of the surgeries have been done at Fort Bragg, and an additional 8,000 soldiers at the post are on a waiting list to have the procedure between now and January, when many are due to be deployed.

The surgery is viewed by the military as a way to help soldiers see better on the battlefield, where split-second decisions can save lives. Soldiers without glasses can also more easily use instruments such as night-vision goggles.

In combat, soldiers who lose their glasses are not only a danger to themselves, but also a liability to others who must look after them.

"When you take somebody's vision from them, it's devastating," said Lt. Col. Beverly Land, deputy commander of clinical services at Blanchfield.

Priority for the surgery is typically given to soldiers mostly likely to be in combat. It is offered at eight Army medical centers, and at least 10 other Navy and Air Force medical facilities.

The surgery costs the Army about \$1,000 per soldier compared to an average \$1,785

per eye in the civilian sector. That's because the military is not doing the surgery for profit, and does not have to pay expenses such as advertising.

In 1993, the military's first refractive surgery program started at Naval Medical Center San Diego. The surgery was done on Navy SEALs -- many of whom had problems with losing contacts or glasses while parachuting or in the water.

Of 450,000 active Army soldiers, an estimated one-third are potentially eligible for surgery, said Col. Kraig Bowers, refractive surgery consultant for the Army surgeon general.

But with its current funding, the Army is only able to treat about 10,000 to 12,000 soldiers a year.

Lt. Col. Mark Torres, an optometrist who has analyzed surveys of soldiers who have deployed with and without the surgery said they overwhelmingly say it was a major benefit.

"We look at this surgery as a performance-enhancing procedure that gives us a soldier that's better able to function and operate," said Torres, chief of refractive surgery at Madigan Army Medical Center at Fort Lewis, Washington.

The two types of procedures commonly done by the military are photorefractive keratectomy, or PRK, and laser keratomileusis, or LASIK.

In PRK surgery, a laser is used to reshape the surface of the cornea. LASIK involves cutting a flap in the cornea and using a laser to reshape the exposed corneal tissue before the flap is put back.

A majority of the more than half a million people who get the surgery every year in the civilian sector opt to get LASIK because of the convenience -- a patient can often return to work the following day.

Even though PRK has a longer healing time -- up to a week -- it is the choice of most rough-and-tumble soldiers because it is regarded as more durable. Jumping out of helicopters or running through the woods could potentially cause damage to the flap created by the LASIK procedure.

**“ Our work load and number of patients has gone through the roof. ”**  
-- Maj. Glenn Sanford



That's also why most forms of LASIK are disallowed for those doing combat dives and Air Force pilots flying over 14,000 feet. Air Force pilots are required to have perfect vision when they start. However, they can get the PRK surgery if their eyesight worsens.

With both types of surgery, soldiers are warned that there are potential consequences, including that less than 1 percent won't see as well after surgery. Potential side effects include dry eyes and seeing halos or bursts of light.

Not all soldiers with vision problems are candidates either. The surgery is not recommended for people taking certain medications or those experiencing health problems such as glaucoma.

"This is surgery," Sanford said. "Like all surgeries, there are potential complications."

John Ciccone, spokesman for the American Society for Cataract and Refractive Surgery, said the military does a good job of screening candidates and informing soldiers of the risks.

"The screening they do is extremely thorough and intensive compared to the civilian sector," Ciccone said.

Some soldiers are skeptical.

Pinero, who has needed glasses for 30 years, said it was only after he heard other soldiers praising the surgery that he decided to do it.

"I don't make any decision lightly," Pinero said. "Everyone has had positive things to say about it."

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