"My grandchildren will not know what glasses are," says ophthalmologist Robert Maloney (in L.A. with patient Lillian Fazzi).

Now Read This

Bye-bye, bifocals? A new three-minute procedure may help baby boomers read without glasses

It happens to everyone sooner or later: You can't read a book unless you hold it at arm's length. You have to ask a friend to help you peruse a menu. Olivier Besnoin noticed his vision was headed south the day the stock market data he obsessively watches scroll across his computer screen was simply too small to read. Even so, he balked at wearing bifocals. "I was not ready for that. That's not me," says the 47-year-old former fashion model, who races motorcycles in his spare time.

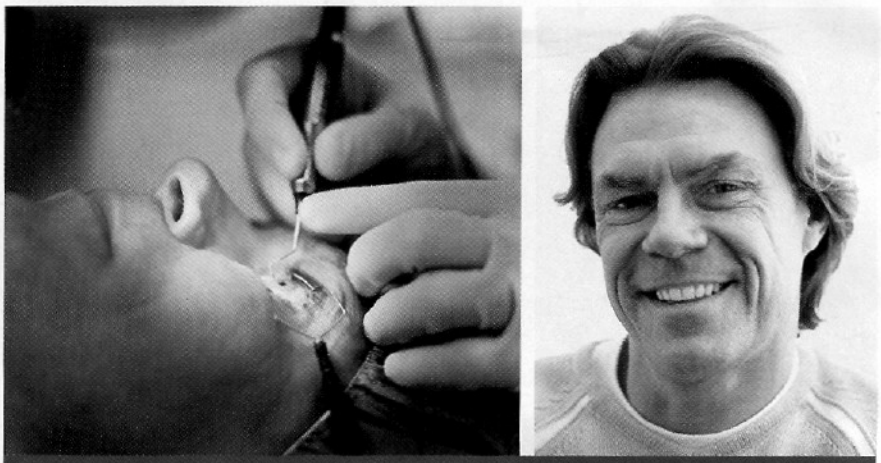
Besnoin's life suddenly came back into focus last month after he had a surgical procedure called conductive keratoplasty, or CK. Approved by the FDA on March 16, the new technique uses radio waves to remedy the common age-induced vision loss known as presbyopia—the inability to decipher small type, which sends baby boomers reaching for their reading glasses. Now when he rides his motorcycle, "I can read the instruments better," says Besnoin, who lives in Hermosa Beach, Calif.

CK is not cheap—it costs up to $2,500 and is not covered by insurance. It only works for those who didn't need glass-

Photographs by DAVE LAURIDSEN

es before they turned 40 and has not been approved for nearsightedness (myopia), one of the most common vision problems. Nevertheless, experts predict the market for the new and relatively painless method will be huge. "It's another option for patients who want to avoid reading glasses," says Harvard Medical School clinical instructor Ernest Kornmehl, author of an article on CK that is due to appear in an upcoming issue of the *New England Journal of Medicine.* Unlike LASIK, which uses a laser to slice and reshape the cornea, CK doesn't involve cutting (see box). Instead, a tiny probe applies radio waves in a circular pattern just below the surface of the eye. The radio waves act like a belt reshaping the cornea into a perfect circle, improving its contour and allowing light to focus properly on the back of the eye.

Ophthalmologist Robert Maloney, 46, who has appeared on ABC's *Extreme Makeover* and performed LASIK on celebs like Cindy Crawford and Michael Douglas, says he was initially doubtful that such a noninvasive procedure could do any good. But since participating in the Food and Drug Administration's two-year clinical trial, he has begun offering the treatment at his office in Los Angeles. "Somebody said to me that reading glasses are God's way of preventing us from lying about our age," says Maloney. Now he believes that scientific innovations will eventually make all glasses obsolete. "You'll only see them in museums," he says.



"I'm always very active, so for me this was becoming a handicap," says Olivier Besnoin (undergoing CK April 19, left, and afterward) of his increasingly blurry vision.

Don't call the Smithsonian just yet. For reasons not yet understood, CK does not work for about one percent of patients. And the procedure is not a cure for the hardening of tissues in the eye that occurs over time but rather a means of temporarily correcting it. Since it's usually performed on one eye, there is also a concern patients will have trouble with depth perception when driving. (Maloney says he fits his patients with a single contact lens so they can test the effects before surgery.) As with wrinkle-fighting Botox injections, results eventually wear off, and CK will have to be repeated, approximately every three to five years, up to a maximum of three times. Still, that's good enough for Sharon Cohen, a supervising deputy attorney general for California who had CK last month. Immediately afterward she yelled out, "Unbelievable!" Maloney asked if she could read her watch. Cohen, 61, looked at her wrist and said, "Yes. It's 12:08 p.m."

"It's amazing," she says now. "I'm thrilled."

Bob Meadows. Sandra Marquez in Los Angeles

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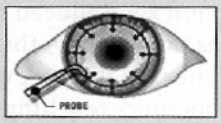
Look, Ma, No Glasses

Conductive keratoplasty is one of several procedures designed to restore vision with relatively noninvasive surgery. A look at how it works—and other options now available:

CONDUCTIVE KERATOPLASTY

STEP 1 After drops numb the eye, the doctor uses ink to draw a circular pattern on the cornea, the outermost layer of the eye. (The ink will later wash away.)

STEP 2 A probe the width of a hair applies radio waves at predetermined points on the circular pattern, tightening the cornea. Dozens of tiny punctures are made, entering 1/50th of an inch into the surface.



STEP 3 The treatment, which takes about three minutes, reshapes the aging cornea into a perfect circle, improving near vision. The patient typically notices an improvement within a few days.

OTHER PROCEDURES

LASIK SURGERY: A doctor cuts a flap in the cornea with a knife, then uses a laser to reshape tissue underneath. For near- and farsightedness and astigmatism.

PRK: These disorders can also be treated with photorefractive keratectomy, using a laser to remove tissue from the cornea's surface.

CORNEAL REFRACTIVE LENSES: Worn every night, these contacts temporarily reshape the cornea while you sleep.

SRP: Currently being tested, surgical reversal of presbyopia is a technique in which contact-lens pieces are implanted in the white of the eye to improve focus.