

Howard V. Gimbel

Dialogue With an Adventist Eye Surgeon in Canada



Dr. Gimbel, 58, has a reputation as one of the world's best cataract surgeons. Thousands of patients from around the globe come to the Gimbel Eye Centre in the city of Calgary, in Alberta, Canada. There is also a steady stream of doctors coming from major eye clinics to observe and learn from what he is doing. Many in the medical profession consider him a technological pioneer in a number of forms of eye surgery. "Dr. Gimbel has done more for eyesight than any single individual ever," says the *Edmonton Journal*. This interview was held at the Gimbel Eye Centre in the city of Calgary, in Alberta, Canada. Recently Dr. Gimbel was inducted into the Alberta Order of Excellence, and he also received the southern Alberta's business version of a Hollywood Academy Award—the Milber/Fenery Pinnacle Award.

Let's get better acquainted with this surgeon who takes his profession as a ministry. His wife and associate for 36 years, Mrs. Judy Gimbel, joined us for the interview. She is the president of the company that manages the clinic.

■ *How did you discover your vocation as an eye surgeon?*

I grew up in a farming community and studied at Canadian Union College, Walla Walla College, and then Loma Linda University. In my senior year of medicine I felt drawn to ophthalmology, which utilized a lot of optics, physics, and instrumentation. I sincerely feel that I was just following the Lord's leading. After finishing my studies and during the early years of my practice, I developed an interest in technological breakthroughs in the field of cataract surgery because I could see how these developments could benefit patients.

■ *Can you explain what a cataract is?*

It is the most common major eye problem in the world, causing millions of people to lose their sight. A cataract is a

cloudiness that develops within the naturally clear lens of the eye. It disturbs the eye's process of turning light into sight. A person developing cataracts generally experiences such symptoms as gradual loss of color vision, increasingly blurred and distorted vision, double vision, etc. Eventually, blindness results. The good news is that modern surgery can usually restore clear, focused vision.

■ *How is the problem corrected?*

There are two main steps: first, the clouded part of the natural lens is removed; second, the natural lens is replaced. Our clinic uses the most advanced method of cataract extraction, known as phaco-emulsification. It requires a very small incision—only about 3 millimetres. The patients are fully conscious. To perform the surgery, we use an operating microscope, make a small incision and make a smooth round opening in the front of the lens capsule. With an ultrasonic probe, vibrating at around 40,000 times a second, we break up and suction out the clouded gel. A manufactured permanent intraocular lens is then implanted. With these lenses, clear, focused vision is possible almost

immediately after surgery, with no glasses required. This new lens requires no care and does not need replacing. The incision is made in such a way that when the fluid pressure within the eye is restored, the incision is sealed, thus requiring no suturing. After drinking some juice, having their vital signs monitored, and receiving instructions for care, patients are free to leave.

■ *We've heard that the relatives of the patient are able to be present at the surgery. Is that correct?*

We encourage this. Family members and friends can watch from an area beside the operating room. They can see through the glass and watch every detail of the surgery on a large TV screen. A member of our staff is there to explain each part of the surgery to them. In addition, the family's conversation is recorded on a videotape that is available to the patient to take home at no extra charge.

■ *How many surgeries do you perform in an average day?*

Each one takes me about 15 minutes. We operate on an average of 25 patients daily. That totals about 5,000 operations

per year. We have done more than 40,000 surgeries altogether.

■ *What rate of success have you had?*

With modern techniques, very few people experience any serious complications—much less than 1 percent. So we have a success rate of more than 99 percent. When complications do arise, we can usually correct or control them with further surgery or treatment. Ninety-five percent of patients receive 20/40 vision (near normal good vision) or better from surgery. The other 5 percent do not necessarily have complications, but other degenerative conditions prevent a full restoration of vision.

■ *Your stamina is remarkable, Dr. Gimbel. To what do you attribute your ability to perform at such a high level?*

I lead a very simple and disciplined lifestyle—regular exercise, good nutrition, and no hangovers. I avoid meat, dairy products, and refined sugars. These simple measures and trusting in God's power bring health and peace of mind. That makes all the difference, not the equipment or the instruments!

■ *Do you pray for your patients?*

We give patients a prayer request card when they come for treatment, telling them I will be praying for them as I operate. The patients can also indicate if they want me to pray with them before the surgery. If they check "yes," I do. In my heart it's my responsibility to share my faith in God in my workplace.

■ *How else do you share your faith with your patients?*

We don't try to impose the Adventist doctrine on our patients. But we strive to be witnesses to Christ through the quality of care and in other ways. The clinic has a rack of literature with books and tracts. TV monitors in different areas of the clinic show *Life-style Magazine*, *It Is Written*, and other Adventist programs that the patients may choose from. After each surgery we provide each patient the choice of one of two books: *Eight Sure Steps to Health and Happiness* or *The Character of Christ*.

Besides that, we are active members of the Central Seventh-day Adventist

Church. I enjoy singing in quartets, in the choir, and playing various instruments.

■ *Have you experienced any problems with living your faith in your professional life?*

Early in my practice there was a temptation to attend professional meetings on the Sabbath, but I have always declined and determined not to compromise. The Lord helped us in our convictions. Now it is no longer a temptation, even though I am sometimes asked to make professional presentations and teach on the Sabbath. I don't even consider it. As a result, frequently people will rearrange their schedule. Everyone knows that we are Seventh-day Adventists and that we keep the Sabbath.

Each year our foundation organizes the Canadian Symposium on Cataract and Refractive Surgery, designed to bring many of the world's most experienced eye surgeons together to share their latest surgical developments. There I once presented a talk entitled "One Day in Seven." In this presentation I told the doctors how God created us with a daily biorhythm and that Sabbath rest was as essential to our health as a good night's sleep each night. Each year at our conference we try to present some aspect of physical, mental, and spiritual health. Eye/hand coordination in our profession is key. People notice that I have no hand tremors, while some surgeons 10 to 15 years younger have difficulties in that area. I don't feel tired at the end of the day as others often do. I think that this is a witness of our Adventist health message. One colleague said to us: "This symposium is my spiritual retreat every year. Not a medical one only!"

■ *Technically and financially, the Gimbel Eye Centre is an impressive operation. How did you start it?*

In 1980 I was frustrated with the limited access to hospital operating rooms and with patients waiting up to two years for surgery. I used the operating room of a dental clinic adjacent to my office to perform some of Canada's first out-of-hospital cataract surgeries. Since then the centre has expanded to more than 25,000 square feet of space and has a staff of more

than 130, including 10 doctors and a research team.

■ *Can you tell us what you consider the reason for your success?*

We attribute everything to the Lord's blessings. There are three areas in which we are particularly striving to do our best.

First is faithfulness in returning to God what belongs to Him: our tithe and offerings. We feel that the Lord could not bless us if we were not faithful in that respect. Early in our health ministry a young pastor showed us the importance of systematic giving, and we are indebted to him for that. The large practice helps us to afford the latest technology, which is always very costly. And we see in this God's blessings.

Second, we are strongly committed to the Seventh-day Adventist health message. We believe in the content of *The Ministry of Healing* and give importance to what God indicates in the area of health.

Third, we feel that we are in the world to serve. I state this in a creed that is displayed in our facility. It reads: "By accepting this post, I dedicate myself to the service of mankind without prejudice, or concern for personal gain. I will never lose the art of caring, but will practice patience, listen attentively, and always make my time and willing attention available where most needed. As I strive to achieve these aims, may my success be measured in the restored health and continued happiness of the people in my care. H. V. Gimbel."

■ *Any final words that you would like to share with our readers?*

"We are privileged that we are part of a team that gives sight," Judy Gimbel said. "Christ gave sight. We all should do that in a spiritual way." □

Interview by Victor A. Schulz

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