

## **COMMENT FROM THE PUBLIC: REGARDING SENATE BILL 55**

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### **I HAD SYMPTOMS OF RETINAL DETACHMENT**

In June of 2008, I stood up from the dining table, and suddenly saw hundreds of small black dots, flying across the field of vision in my right eye.

Not long afterward, a round black circle appeared at the lower corner of the eye, too.

Alarmed, I told my husband I was worried this might be a retinal detachment, We went to the DeBarr Costco.

### **COSTCO OPTOMETRIST LOOKED, AND SAID IT WAS NOTHING**

The optometrist at Costco was breezy and friendly. I told him my symptoms and concerns. He checked my eyes with a number of large machines and announced I was fine; I had "floaters." And, they were nothing, he said.

Oh -- and by the way -- his equipment had seen the start of a cataract. He gave me a business card for a doctor friend of his in Anchorage who did cataract surgery.

### **DAYS LATER MY SYMPTOMS GOT MUCH WORSE**

I run a rural tourism company, out of Gakona, which is 200 miles from Anchorage. We drove home, through the Chugach Mountains. At home -- away from the distractions of the city -- I began to worry even more about my symptoms.

The black disk down at the corner of my eye was getting larger. The spots were still there. The spots and disk were there even when I closed my eye.

Then, after several days, the spot began to take on color, and spin around, trailing tendrils of light and color. Clearly something terrible was going on.

### **JEANNE, AT THE EXPRESSO STAND, KNEW MORE THAN THE OPTOMETRIST**

Near my house in Gakona, in the summertime, there's a little roadside expresso stand -- Jeanne's Java. The woman running it, Jeanne, was a chatty, funny lady. On occasion, during the summer, I'd go up the road from my house, on my bike, to sit around on the porch of her expresso stand and listen to her tales of life in Alaska.

Several years before this incident, she had told me of the time she had been driving the Alcan, and had begun going blind -- from a retinal detachment. She had been saved by a doctor.

Now, in 2008, with my eye giving my problems, I decided to bike up to Jeanne's. Sitting on her steps, I told her of my bad symptoms. "You have a retinal detachment," she told me. "You have to go to the doctor right away. Or you'll go blind."

Jeanne -- who probably has no college education at all (and who certainly is not a Costco optometrist who sees dozens of patients every day) went into her little trailer, and pulled out her purse. Inside, she was carrying a little batch of business cards. They were all for Dr. Scott Limstrom, an ophthalmologist in Anchorage.

She chose to carry the cards around (she told me) because she felt retinal detachments were so dangerous. And, she wanted to have the cards right there, in the event anybody (like me) crossed her path who had this terrible thing happen to them, too.

### **AS MY EYE BECAME TOTALLY BLIND, I DROVE TO ANCHORAGE**

I got into my car several hours later and began the long drive through the mountains, back to Anchorage. While driving, my right eye began to fill up with a pitch black emptiness. By the time I got into town -- at around 1 am -- i could only see about 1/4 inch of the world, at the very top of my eye.

## **DR. SCOTT LIMSTROM SCHEDULED ME IMMEDIATELY FOR SURGERY**

I went to Dr. Scott Limstrom. He is not an optometrist. He is an ophthalmologist. He looked in my eye, just like the Costco guy did. He told me (as I had feared when I went to Costco) that I needed immediate surgery. He told me there are very few surgeries that need to be done *immediately* (emergency appendectomies are among them.) The other is retinal detachment surgery.

## **THINGS HAD NOW GOTTEN FAR WORSE**

It was now at least a week or more after I had seen the Costco optometrist, and heard his mistaken diagnosis. My situation was now far, far worse. My lifetime vision was in peril. There is no Plan B when your retina detaches. It's surgery -- or blindness.

Right after the surgery, I had to hold my head steady, sleeping upright, for at least a week, so as not to scar my retina. It hurt terribly. My eye was swollen. Nothing worked right for months.

*But now I can see.*

If I had not gone to Dr. Limstrom, and had stuck with the cool, hipster optometrist's diagnosis, I would now be completely blind. In both eyes. (My other eye also had a retinal tear, several years later, which was caught and repaired by Dr. Limstrom and his fellow experts.)

## **YOU HAVE NO IDEA**

If you are a member of an Alaska State Labor & Commerce Committee, you probably have no idea of what it's like to have the inside of something fragile and gooey, *like your eye*, fall apart -- tear and peel off on the inside, like steamed wallpaper sliding off a bedroom wall.

You have no idea how terrifying it is to drive by Sheep Mountain Lodge, on the Glenn, tilt your head down, and look at the little log buildings -- realizing it's perhaps for the last time -- through the tiny slit of your collapsing vision.

You have no idea how stupid you feel about trusting some guy at Costco in the eyeglass department -- when he told you everything was "fine. "

You have no idea what it's like to contemplate a life in which that entire world of landscapes, friends, family, reading, TV, walking, driving -- living -- is totally wiped out. First, because your eye was doing this. And second, because you didn't go to an ophthalmologist -- but went, instead, to an optometrist.

I believed an *optometrist*. A person who was not informed enough, or wise enough, or educated enough to make an accurate assessment -- even though I specifically asked if it was a retinal detachment.

Ultimately, I was accurately evaluated by an espresso stand owner, instead! She knew more than the optometrist at Costco. *What does that mean?*

## **YOU ARE NOT IN A POSITION TO MAKE AN INFORMED DECISION**

You -- in the Alaska State Legislature -- are not in the position to determine what an optometrist can do. It's that simple. Just as the optometrist at Costco was not educated enough to know that he had no idea if I had a retinal detachment or not.

He didn't have a clue that this was beyond his pay grade. He should have ***known*** he didn't know. And he should have sent me a real doctor!

## **PULL THE EYE OUT OF A SALMON THIS SUMMER; IMAGINE HOW SKILLED YOU'D HAVE TO BE TO PUT IT TOGETHER AGAIN**

Next summer, when you go salmon fishing, and you're cleaning your salmon, dip the tip of your cleaning knife into the salmon's eyesocket. Pull out the eye, and then slice through the gel and actually look at it.

Now imagine that your entire vision -- for the rest of your life -- depended on the skill of the person handling that eye.

This isn't about you. It isn't about the State of Alaska. It isn't about the "rights" of optometrists.

It's about *us* -- the people whose eyes have burst apart, and who need real doctors. Trained doctors. People who have the skill and patience and determination to take that mass of jello and put it all back together again. Ophthalmologists.

### **HURTFUL & IGNORANT INSULTS**

I hope you have had the patience to read this. (Frankly, I'm seriously worried you haven't.)

This is all about patience. When I went to Dr. Limstrom, and watched him obsessively fuss over my eyes, I told him something. I told him how much I appreciated his determination and compulsive attention to detail.

He, and the other experts just don't give up.

That's exactly what the patient needs. The only thing a patient needs. To read some optometrist's rant in the Anchorage Daily News that ophthalmologists are "egomaniacal bastards" is stupid, ignorant, and insulting.

Unhappily, it shows a depth of vitriol and unprofessionalism on the part of the Alaska Optometric Association that puts patients at risk.