

October 2010

The Eyes Are the Windows to What??

“The eyes are the windows to the soul...”

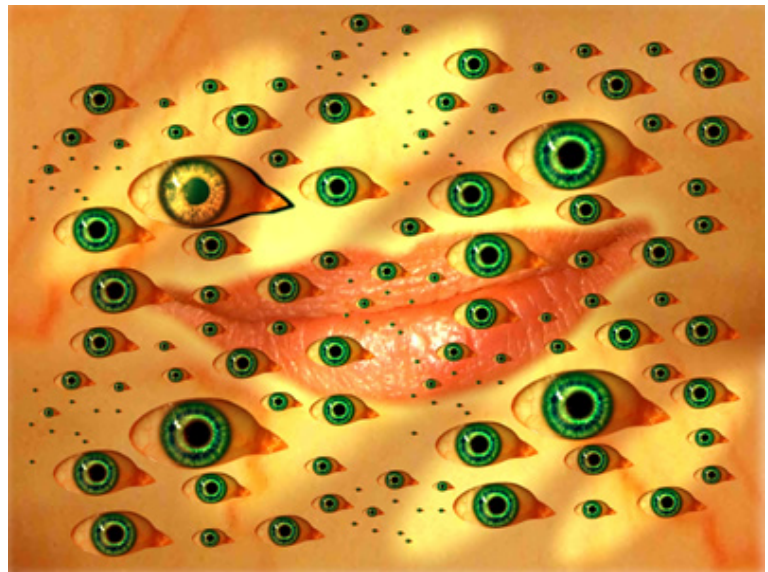
The quote above is a very old one and the origin of it is not clear. The meaning is not clear either and is open to some fairly broad interpretation. What is clear is that we hear a variation of this almost daily, phrased as the following question: “Doctor, what can you tell by looking into my eyes?”

Wow, talk about an open ended question! Well, we can tell an awful lot; that much I know. Not in an intellectual or emotional way of course (I’m just not that good yet), but in a medical way, yes we can indeed see some things that other types of doctors may not. It should be noted that I’ve been asked to read fortunes, tell moods and even pick winning lottery numbers after looking into a set of peepers. If only I could...

Think of the eye as a camera for a moment. The clear cornea is at the front and along with the lens inside does the

focusing. The white of your eye is the sclera, the “body of the camera”, providing protection and structure. The retina is the “film” in the camera, providing the light gathering ability. The aperture of this “camera” is your iris and pupil which opens and closes with varying light conditions. Finally the lids protect the whole apparatus with its quick blink reflex. Every one of these tissues can be affected by systemic diseases and hidden conditions that we may discover during an eye examination.

Perhaps the most intriguing tissue is the retina. This most crucial of tissues is vital to vision, and has the consistency and texture of wet tissue paper. This wet membrane gathers little shards of light through its ONE MILLION nerve fibers and sends that image through its tenuous electrical network, upside down and backwards, to the brain for interpretation. In the brain it’s righted and flipped so you don’t fall over while looking at whatever interests you. This happens instantly, consistently and without thought, moving parts, fatigue or failure in the vast majority of cases. I think most eye doctors would consider the brain the most fascinating part of the visual system.



The visual system is elegant and very complex. While the parts don't generally fail with fatigue, they are dependent on good blood flow and a healthy cardiovascular system to remain healthy. Consider that the eye is the ONLY organ in the body where we can watch blood coursing and delivering the oxygen and elements necessary for health. Imagine that when we look into the back of your eyes, we are looking at an end organ with its blood supply being delivered without any invasive cutting or probing- using only light -and you begin to appreciate just how complex the human body is and why we love what we do so much.

It has been said that "The eye is an island of the brain" and this is in fact quite true. Anything along the pathway from the eye to the brain that disrupts vision can indeed be a clue to a hidden disease or condition. We have, unfortunately, diagnosed multiple sclerosis, stroke, diabetes, meningitis, neurological degenerations and even brain tumors through our routine eye examinations. Happily, we have saved some lives detecting these things through our work as well.

The blood vessels arising from the internal carotid artery to feed the eye, and the veins that drain the blood into the jugular vein, can reveal hidden systemic diseases as well. Cardiovascular and other blood born diseases often rear their ugly heads on the inside of the eye. Things we see the most are hypertension, diabetes and elevated cholesterol, but we also detect such odd things as anemia, cancers, Lyme disease, heart disease, fungal infections and AIDS. Autoimmune diseases can cause inner eye inflammation or dry eyes. Skin conditions can cause dry eyes and even ulcerations. Thyroid disease can produce the characteristic look of Graves Disease (think Marty Feldman or Barbara Bush). Double vision can be from neurological diseases such as Parkinsons disease, fluid on the brain, even viral infections.

I would ask you to check our "Case Reports" section of this website as we add interesting cases from our practice from time to time. It helps reinforce that your eyes are part of your overall health.

The point here is that yes, we can tell a lot by looking into your eyes, but just because we don't see anything wrong does not mean you are completely healthy. You must see your family doctor for your yearly physical examinations because usually by the time we detect a problem, it's been present for a while. The eye is an end organ that does reveal a lot about where your body has been.

We may not be able to tell if you're melancholy or sad, or happy or proud. We might not be able to pick your winning lottery tickets. But we cherish the opportunity to tell something about you through our examinations and the opportunity to preserve your vision. Stay healthy, and keep your eyes healthy, so the next time we look, we see nothing but healthy tissue.

Dr. Sacco