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Professional Envy and Its Impact on the Industry

Rod Solar looks at "the hidden force shaping ophthalmology"

By Rod Solar | 3/24/2025 | 5 min read

Having worked with over 100 refractive and cataract surgeons across 38 countries, I've seen professional envy manifest in nearly every market. Whether in London, Dubai, New York, or Melbourne, the same patterns emerge:

- Surgeons feeling overshadowed by high-volume competitors.
- Practices frustrated by younger surgeons leveraging social media dominance.
- Top-tier clinics watching newcomers disrupt patient perception.

Envy is an unspoken force that can drive competition, influence business decisions, and even shape patient outcomes. While envy exists in every profession, it's particularly sharp in high-stakes, high-status fields like ophthalmology, where the difference between being a leader and being overlooked can be razor-thin.

Rod Solar

The source of professional envy in ophthalmology

Envy doesn't emerge from failure. It emerges when a peer, often with similar qualifications and experience, seems to get ahead in ways that don't feel entirely fair. Here's where it comes from:

Status anxiety

Surgeons want to be seen as the best in their field. Whether speaking at conferences, leading clinical trials, or getting featured in the press, the quest for professional status and recognition is relentless. When another surgeon dominates the conversation, it can sting.

Unequal recognition

Two surgeons may have the same technical skills, but one has a better brand, a more substantial online presence, or a PR machine that generates more attention. While the other surgeon may be just as capable – perhaps even more so – they struggle to be noticed.

Perceived undeserved success

A high-volume, low-cost refractive surgeon might out-market a peer who prioritizes premium care and meticulous follow-ups. If the public perceives the high-volume practice as equally skilled – despite lower patient touchpoints – resentment grows.

Market competition

Ophthalmology is increasingly business-driven, with practices competing for the same pool of patients. One practice's growth can be perceived as another's decline. Even among colleagues who respect each other, there's an invisible scoreboard tracking referrals, surgical volume, and revenue.

Legacy vs. newcomers

Experienced surgeons may resent younger, social-media-savvy doctors who quickly gain visibility through platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. These digital-first surgeons can dominate patient perception even before proving themselves in the OR.

Patient choice

Surgeons believe they earn patients based on merit. But in reality, patients choose based on branding, reputation, and convenience. When a rival practice successfully attracts premium patients, it can feel deeply unfair to those who believe they "deserve" those cases.

How professional envy manifests in ophthalmology

Envy doesn't always appear as outright hostility. It often takes more subtle forms that shape industry dynamics.

Gossip and undermining

One of the most common forms of professional envy is negative chatter – surgeons quietly criticizing a rival's ethics, outcomes, or business model. Comments like "They cut corners," or "Their patient volume must come at the expense of quality" are often fueled by envy more than facts.

Price wars and devaluation

Some surgeons respond to competition by lowering their fees, hoping to outprice a rival. This can lead to a race to the bottom, where both price and perceived quality suffer. In the long run, it's damaging for both surgeons and patients.

Over-credentialing

To reclaim status, some ophthalmologists pursue additional certifications, fellowships, or academic titles, not necessarily for learning but as a "status flex".

Skepticism toward innovation

Surgeons who missed early adoption of new technologies (e.g., SMILE, FLACS) may dismiss them as marketing gimmicks – until they feel forced to adopt them.

Referral politics

Some surgeons build exclusive relationships with optometrists to control referrals, making it harder for competitors to get access to cases.

Public debates and online discrediting

It's common for ophthalmologists to use LinkedIn posts, panel discussions, or research articles to indirectly challenge a competitor's approach under the guise of "patient safety" or "best practices."

Expensive office upgrades

Surgeons may invest in luxury clinic environments, VIP service models, and concierge-style care to signal prestige and outshine competitors.

Online visibility warfare

Google Ads, SEO, and video marketing have become critical battlegrounds. Some practices outspend rivals on advertising to maintain top rankings, even if it doesn't directly correlate with surgical outcomes.

How to discern constructive criticism from envy-driven advice

Not all criticism is valuable. The key is to identify whether feedback is based on genuine insight or influenced by jealousy.

- *Consider the source.* Are they where you want to be? Have they helped many others do what you want to do? Have they built something worth emulating? If not, their criticism may be rooted in insecurity, not wisdom.
- *Look at their actions, not just their words.* Many will say one thing and do another. Watch their behavior and results, not just their advice.
- *Check their tone.* Constructive feedback is meant to help you improve. Envy-driven advice often feels bitter, vague, or dismissive.
- *Test it against your goals.* If the advice doesn't align with your direction, discard it. Stay focused on your unique path.

The reality check: reframing the game

Envy signals a belief that someone else is playing the game better. But rather than letting it breed resentment, it can be a catalyst for growth.

- *Invest in unique positioning.* Rather than copying a rival's strategy, build a differentiated practice that highlights your uniqueness.
- *Focus on outcomes.* Marketing matters, but exceptional patient results create word-of-mouth that no ad campaign can match.
- *Play the long game.* Reputation takes time. Trends change, and status shifts. Those who stay focused on long-term excellence outlast those who chase short-term wins.

Professional envy is inevitable. How you respond to it determines whether it holds you back or motivates you to level up.

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