

# Cataracts can be cured

During Eye Awareness Week (7-11 October) and particularly on World Sight Day, which takes place on 10 October, South Africans are being urged to take care of their vision and to help others do the same. This year's theme is about cataract surgery - the gift of sight.

A cataract is the leading cause of blindness in South Africa, responsible for about 50% of blindness, and has been identified as a national health priority. It is primarily a disease affecting elderly people. In older people, cataracts are so common that they are regarded as a normal part of the aging process. By age 65, about half of the human population has a cataract and, by age 75, most people have a cataract.

Though cataracts affect millions of people, being diagnosed with one is not a reason to despair. Cataract surgery has been shown to be one of the most cost-effective and successful health-care interventions. In fact, about 95 % of patients are able to restore their full pre-cataract distance vision after undergoing the standard intraocular lens (IOL) procedure.

A cataract is described as a natural clouding of the eye lens. Contrary to popular belief, a cataract is not a "film" over the eye. Rather it is a gradual thickening of the lens that causes the lens to become so clouded that light is either distorted or cannot reach the back of the eye (the retina) for transmission to the brain.

Symptoms of age-related cataracts can generally develop very slowly and painlessly over the years and are often initially discovered by an eye doctor during routine exams, but may not be treated until the cataract symptoms affect daily activities and quality of life.

The most common symptoms of cataracts include:

- Cloudy or blurry vision
- Colours seem faded
- Glare - headlights, lamps or sunlight may appear too bright; a halo may appear around lights
- Poor night vision
- Double vision or multiple images in one eye, although this symptom may clear as the cataract gets larger
- Frequent prescription changes in eyeglasses or contact lenses

"Cataract surgery can make a dramatic difference in the life of patients. Their vision can be restored with a procedure that can take as little as 5 to 15 minutes," said ophthalmologist Professor Trevor Carmichael from Charlotte Maxeke Johannesburg Academic Hospital. He says routine eye checks and screening can detect the presence of cataracts and recommends that everyone over the age of 40 should have their eyes tested once a year.

## **Backlog in public sector addressed by private surgeons, suppliers**

Everyone should have access to quality eye care, regardless of economic or geographic circumstances. The causes of avoidable blindness are frequently associated with poverty and lack of access to quality services. Yet barriers to good eye health exist in all communities across the globe and for people of all ages.

Unfortunately, due to the high incidence of cataracts in South Africa, there is a severe backlog of patients requiring cataract surgery, with the goal of 1500 cataract surgeries per million population not being achieved within the public sector. Fortunately, initiatives such as Eye Care Awareness Week do help somewhat in increasing the number of patients who benefit from this cost-effective and successful surgery.

Every year, the Ophthalmological Society of South Africa (OSSA) rallies its members, mostly ophthalmologists in private practice, to donate their surgical skills free of charge to help alleviate the situation and assist in restoring sight in as many patients as possible.

In an effort to enhance sight and enhance lives, leading eye care company, Alcon Laboratories, one of its industrial partners, supports OSSA every year in this initiative in the form of significant donations of surgical product and lenses.

Last year its contribution included 500 intraocular lenses (worth approximately R740 000) and R540 000 worth of assorted surgical products and disposables and 2013 will be no different.

By being educated and spreading the message, people can help eliminate barriers and reduce the incidence of preventable blindness and visual impairment.

This Eye Care Awareness Week and World Sight Day do not lose sight of cataracts. Encourage people to have their eyes tested.

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