

Screening helps prevent diabetes blindness

January 12 2010

(PhysOrg.com) -- A diabetes sufferer whose sight was saved thanks to a pioneering new treatment method has hailed the Newcastle University and National Health Service experts who helped him.

Every year in the UK, more than 2,000 people with the condition go blind and this screening programme, which is being rolled out across the country, could help prevent that.

Mark Thompson, 40, from Westerhope, was diagnosed with diabetes at 17.

Thanks to a screening programme developed in Newcastle, medics were able to spot and treat a problem with one of his eyes which could have led to him going blind in that eye.

Mark, who works at Newcastle General Hospital as a maintenance assistant, said: "This treatment is a great benefit to people suffering from diabetes.

"I am a keen cyclist and that could have been affected if I had gone blind in one eye. I would definitely have had to stop driving and my work would have been affected.

"This has definitely been a massive thing for me, I'm so grateful to the team at Newcastle.

"It is a great breakthrough and I would urge anyone with diabetes to get

checked out.

“You hear some horror stories of people going completely blind. I wasn’t that bad but I could have been if I hadn’t been treated early.”

Research by experts from Newcastle Biomedicine, a partnership between Newcastle University and Newcastle NHS Foundation Trust, shows that annual eye screening backed up with effective treatment has a dramatic effect. In the whole of England and Wales, diabetes is the commonest cause of blindness in adults - but not in Newcastle.

The reason is that the retinal screening programme was started in 1986 in Newcastle, leading the way for the rest of the country. Complete eye screening in diabetes was only achieved last year elsewhere.

Prof Roy Taylor who developed the [screening method](#) said: “Blindness is the worst fear of anyone with diabetes. This is the first demonstration that sight can be saved by regular expert screening.

“I am convinced that the benefits of year-on-year retinal screening will be seen nationwide. Newcastle has led the way in saving sight for many people with diabetes,”

Newcastle research over 20 years ago showed that a special retinal camera was very good at detecting retinal problems which required immediate laser treatment. A mobile unit, which was actually a second hand ambulance, visited diabetes clinics in and around Newcastle, and the study ran for two years. It showed that the screening was much better than expected and also that mobile eye screening units were cost-effective and practical. Prof Taylor who led this research was then awarded £150,000 from the Allied Dunbar Foundation to fund 11 further mobile retinal screening vans. These provided retinal screening in areas from Hemel Hempstead to Dundee, and Belfast to Norwich.

This groundbreaking clinical development, directed from Newcastle, has led to the creation of a National eye screening programme throughout the UK. 10 years ago less than half of Health Districts in England and Wales had any organised eye screening for people with diabetes. Now Districts have screening programmes to the national standards. The benefits of year-on-year retinal screening will be seen nationwide in a few years time. Newcastle has led the way in saving sight for people with diabetes.

The service is now provided as part of the services of Newcastle and North Tyneside PCT. It is delivered from the [Diabetes](#) Centre, Newcastle General Hospital and the laser therapy which saves sight is given at the Ophthalmology Department, RVI.

Theresa Dickinson, 45, of Seaton Sluice, was not as lucky as Mark. She went blind when she was in her 20s but believes the new technique could have saved her sight.

“I think this new screening programme will be fantastic. It is a shame it will be too late for me

“By the time they found the problem it was too late for them to do anything.

“I remember being told there was nothing they could do to save my sight. I didn’t cry, I was just in shock. I got home and realised all my plans for life would not happen.

“If there had been something like this available I’m sure I wouldn’t have gone blind.”

Provided by Newcastle University

Citation: Screening helps prevent diabetes blindness (2010, January 12) retrieved 9 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2010-01-screening-diabetes.html>

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