

The Medical Minute: Hope for those with vision loss

February 27 2012, By Marianne E. Boltz

One of the most difficult things optometrists and ophthalmologists must tell a patient is that he or she has an eye disease that already has or could permanently rob them of their vision. Today, the most common diseases in the adult population that cause permanent vision loss are macular degeneration, glaucoma and diabetic retinopathy. Although treatments are available for each of these diseases that can either slow down or prevent further loss of sight, there are far too many individuals whose vision declines regardless of medical intervention. Losing vision as an adult affects every aspect of that person's life: most importantly, the loss of independence and quality of life.

While becoming visually impaired or legally blind is life-changing, hope is not lost for these individuals. Low vision rehabilitation is a multidisciplinary approach to provide visual assistance for any person with acquired [vision loss](#), making the most of his or her remaining vision through the use of magnifying aids or other devices to perform daily tasks. These tasks often include reading, watching TV, using a computer, cooking and pursuing hobbies. Optometrists who specialize in low vision rehabilitation perform thorough evaluations to assess a person's current visual function and then make recommendations for devices to achieve his or her desired goal. For example, getting someone to read the newspaper again could involve prescribing a much stronger bifocal prescription, an illuminated hand-held magnifier or even a high-tech video magnifier/closed-circuit TV. Helping someone watch TV, attend a concert or watch his grandkids play soccer could involve the use of a hand-held monocular telescope or telescopic glasses.

Learning to use low vision devices takes motivation, practice and patience on the part of the patient, but the rewards certainly outweigh the effort. Many studies have shown that although the rate of depression skyrockets in those with recently acquired vision loss, low vision rehabilitation helps to reduce depression by increasing independence and self-worth. Another advantage is that teaching seniors with vision loss new daily living skills to make them more independent can keep them in their own homes longer (rather than seeking the care of an independent living or nursing facility).

Optometrists are not the only care providers to offer special assistance to those with low vision. Occupational therapists, psychologists, social workers, orientation and mobility specialists and low vision therapists all offer unique ways to rehabilitate those with vision loss. Many of these providers are employed by state and local agencies as well as VA Hospitals. In Pennsylvania, a division of the Department of the Labor & Industry called the Bureau of Blindness and Visual Services and the Pennsylvania Association for the Blind both offer social, vocational and rehabilitation services to state residents.

More information: To learn more about vision impairment, low vision rehabilitation or to find a low vision optometrist in your area, go to the Pennsylvania Optometric Association website at pennsylvania.aoa.org

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