

Aussies accept dim vision for the future

Vision loss falsely accepted as a part of ageing
Macular Degeneration Awareness Week 25 – 31 May 2008

Australians believe that blindness and severe vision loss would limit their ability to work, and leave them socially isolated and financially insecure. However, they are not taking simple steps to help reduce the risk of vision loss, according to new research released by the Macular Degeneration (MD) Foundation.

The research, released today to launch *MD Awareness Week (MDAW)*, shows 60 per cent – more than half the Australian workforce – believe they would be unable to work if affected by severe vision loss or blindness.¹ Furthermore, many Australians would rely on a health or welfare agency for support (51 per cent); feel isolated (68 per cent) and lonely (54 per cent).² However very few Australians have sought an eye examination to help reduce their risk of developing Macular Degeneration – Australia's leading cause of blindness.³

The MD Foundation's Chief Executive Officer, Julie Heraghty, is concerned Australians appear to be complacent about their eye health and reluctant to secure their visual future.

"Our new research shows that many people believe difficulties with vision would begin in their 40s and if they developed severe vision loss or blindness, they would be unable to work and would rely on a health or welfare agency for support," said Ms. Heraghty.

"This scenario could lead to years of lost wages and social isolation. However, Australians seem to be accepting of this dim outlook, rather than take action to proactively help reduce the risk of vision loss."

Furthermore, the research shows that more than one in three Australians believe severe vision loss is simply a part of getting older.⁴

"The loss of sight is not a natural part of ageing. Australians should not be resigned to the idea that vision loss is inevitable. MD Awareness Week is an opportunity for all Australians to start taking simple steps to safeguard their vision, and ultimately their emotional health and financial security," Ms. Heraghty said.

The research found that 67 per cent of those aware of MD rated the health of their macula as 'excellent' or 'good'.⁵ It also showed only 21 per cent of Australians claim to have had their macula tested by an optometrist or ophthalmologist.⁶

"Australians need to stop guessing. It is impossible to know the health of your macula without a professional eye examination," said leading retina specialist Dr. Paul Beaumont.

"People over the age of 50 or with a family history of MD should be having their macula checked regularly. They should also be aware of the symptoms of MD so they can seek early treatment if there is a problem."

"There are other simple steps that can help to reduce the risk of MD. Don't smoke; keep a healthy lifestyle; eat a well balanced diet including fish and dark green leafy vegetables; ensuring your intake of lutein, zeaxanthin and omega-3s is sufficient. Also, in consultation with your doctor, consider taking a zinc and antioxidant supplement and provide adequate protection for your eyes from sunlight exposure," said Dr. Beaumont.

In addition to financial and work implications, Australians also believe that severe vision loss or blindness would require significant lifestyle changes and impact their emotional wellbeing.

Many people with severe vision impairment continue to lead high quality, independent lives. However, 95 per cent of Australians believe that if they were affected by severe vision loss or blindness, they would need to modify or discontinue their own daily activities, leading to feelings of depression (76 per cent).⁷

The MD Foundation is the peak Australian body representing the needs of the MD community through education, awareness, support services, research and representation. For more information about MD, contact the Foundation on its free helpline 1800 111 709 or visit www.md.foundation.com.au.

About Macular Degeneration

Macular Degeneration is the leading cause of blindness in Australia. The MD Foundation recommends all Australians over age 50 seek an eye examination and ensure the macula is checked.

The macula is the central part of the retina, which is the light sensitive tissue at the back of the eye. The retina processes all visual images and is responsible for the ability to drive, see colours clearly, read and recognise faces. Macular Degeneration causes progressive macula damage resulting in central vision loss. The need for increased illumination, sensitivity to glare, decreased night vision and poor colour sensitivity can indicate that there is something wrong. The major risk factors for Macular Degeneration are age, smoking and a family history of the disease.

About MD Awareness Week

MD Awareness Week (MDAW) – **Sunday 25 – Saturday 31 May 2008**, aims to raise awareness about MD, the leading cause of blindness in Australia. During this week all Australians are urged to have their eyes tested and be sure that their macula is checked.

Ends

For media inquiries or to arrange an interview, please contact:

Kate McLennan
Weber Shandwick
02 9994 4454

kmclennan@webershandwick.com

Victoria Brooks
Weber Shandwick
02 9994 4066

vbrooks@webershandwick.com

¹ Galaxy Research (2007-08) *Macular Degeneration*, prepared by Galaxy Research for the Macular Degeneration Foundation

² Galaxy Research (2007-08) *Macular Degeneration*, prepared by Galaxy Research for the Macular Degeneration Foundation

³ Galaxy Research (2007-08) *Macular Degeneration*, prepared by Galaxy Research for the Macular Degeneration Foundation

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