

Blindness & Diabetes; Easing the Burden

As a research funding group, part of our mission is to look for gaps in funding – gaps we can plug that could make a significant difference to the lives of those living with diabetes.

One of the recent projects we've supported gives us hope of being able to reduce rates of blindness in people with both type 1 and type 2 diabetes – an area that's of great concern globally.

Diabetic retinopathy (DR) is the most frequent cause of new cases of blindness among adults aged 20 to 74 in developed countries, with 1 in 3 of those with diabetes impacted.

It's caused by damage to the tiny blood vessels inside the retina at the back of the eye and in the early stages there may be no symptoms meaning the disease may not be diagnosed until it is advanced.

It's this issue that is particularly worrying and one of the reasons why we have chosen to help support the next phase of the development of a new artificial intelligence-based screening system for the condition.

The technology, which has been developed by the WA-based Australian e-Health Research Centre at the CSIRO, will for the first time allow GPs to screen patients for DR and then refer those cases in need of specialist treatment, prioritised by the severity of their symptoms.

At the moment only ophthalmologists and optometrists can test for the condition so patients are waitlisted or have to be sent to another clinic, meaning many patients (for one reason or another) do not follow up and the chance of early detection is often lost, causing irreversible loss of sight.

Controlling blood sugar levels over time is the best way to prevent or delay DR but as many of those with diabetes know, maintaining long-term near-normal blood sugar can be easier said than done.

And, with the number of people with the condition tipped to hit 191 million by 2030 worldwide, there is so much need for technology like this; it can potentially mean the difference between someone going blind or not, which obviously has a huge impact on a person's life.

We'll keep you posted on this research project as it unfolds and thank you to each and every one of you who has made it possible for us to fund this important work.

In the meantime, we urge you to ensure your eye screening is up to date.

Let us know your thoughts; we'd love to hear from you.

You can email me here: sherl@diabetesresearchwa.com.au.

