

MEDIA RELEASE

Thursday 23 July, 2015

PATIENTS AT RISK OF LOSING SUBSIDY FOR DRY EYE SYNDROME

Nearly half a million Australians who suffer dry eye syndrome that makes eyes feel 'gritty' or 'sandy' are at risk of losing a subsidy for ocular lubricants, often referred to as artificial tears.

There are serious concerns that the Commonwealth government may remove ocular lubricants from the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme which subsidises their cost.

The dry eye condition can seriously reduce quality of life and the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists (RANZCO) believes treatments should remain subsidised. The condition, known as Sjogren's syndrome (pronounced Show-grin's), is an autoimmune disease with no current cure. The disorder attacks the body's moisture-producing glands and affects around 1 in 200 Australians, 90% of them women.

Early diagnosis is important for preventing the more serious complications of the disease and RANZCO recommends people with dry eyes see an ophthalmologist (eye doctor) regularly to check for damage.

Dr Elsie Chan says diagnosis is determined by an eye examination and performance of a Schirmer Test which measures production of tears using a special paper strip placed under the lower eyelid. "If Sjogren's syndrome is suspected as a cause," she explains, "exploratory blood tests will also be performed."

Dr Chan noted that some patients with Sjogren's syndrome are prescribed hourly lubricant drops. "Diagnosed patients have lifelong symptoms that require effective management to prevent further eye complications and loss of vision. Universal access to affordable ocular lubricants that are the mainstay treatment to relieve dry eye syndrome for patients with this condition is critical."

The exact cause of Sjogren's syndrome is unknown but scientists think it has to do with a combination of genetics and infection with a virus or bacteria. The most frequent complaint is a sensation of a foreign body in the eye, often described as a gritty or sandy feeling.

Other symptoms include decreased tears, redness, a burning sensation, light sensitivity, eye fatigue, itching and a "filmy" effect that interferes with vision. Sjogren's syndrome is often undiagnosed or misdiagnosed because symptoms may mimic those of menopause, drug side effects or inflammatory conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis. While most patients are diagnosed in their late 40s, age is no barrier and children can also suffer from it. The disease can affect nearly all ethnic groups.

NOTE: World Sjogren's Day acknowledges Dr Henrik Sjogren, the Swedish ophthalmologist who discovered the condition in 1933. It is celebrated on 23 July.

For more information or to arrange an interview with an ophthalmologist, contact Luke Vanem or Laura Sefaj at RANZCO on 61 426 842 121 and media@ranzco.edu