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Seeing through the eyes of artists: The Public Health impact of chronic eye disease

Statement of the Problem: Every hour in Australia, approximately 11 Australians are diagnosed with diabetes. Around the world, diabetes is predicted to increase by 55 per cent by the year 2040. Among the ocular complications of diabetes, diabetic maculopathy is the most common and potentially blinding. Typically, it affects individuals in their most productive years and has devastating complications on the patient as well as society as a whole. A recent epidemiology study estimated the prevalence of diabetic maculopathy to be 7 per cent of the Australian population but, within this group, almost half (39 per cent) had associated visual impairment. As eye care professionals, optometrists and ophthalmologists are the gatekeepers for this disease. If we educate our patients to manage their diabetes well, present early to their optometrists, and then refer them for treatment in a timely manner, this disease may be entirely reversible.

Methodology & Theoretical Orientation: To illustrate the nature of diabetic maculopathy I wanted to use the example of famous American impressionist Mary Cassatt, who was diagnosed with diabetes and developed severe complications of retinopathy. This, in addition to other ocular complications of cataracts, caused a premature end to her artistic career. Her fellow Impressionist artists gleaned rather inaccurately, from her poor progress, that cataracts alone – not diabetic retinopathy – was the grim reaper of an artist's life.

Findings: Many of our young diabetic patients exhibit a similar outlook to their disease as Cassatt did. They are eager to continue their lives and work unperturbed by their diagnosis. How then can we enlist our patients to help in prevention of the devastating complications of diabetic maculopathy? Education is key. By getting patients involved in their diabetic care – they can gain control of this disease.

Conclusion & Significance: Eye specialists are often the first to see progression of diabetes as it frequently manifests as worsening maculopathy and/or retinopathy. It is therefore in our patients' best interests that we co-ordinate the care from physicians promptly and provide feedback when we see signs of worsening eye disease.

Recent Publications

1. Dunstan D, Zimmet P, Wellborn T, et al. Diabetes and associated disorders in Australia 2000. The Accelerating Epidemic. Australian diabetes, obesity and lifestyle report 2001. Melbourne: International Diabetes Institute, 2001.
2. International Diabetes Federation, Diabetes Atlas 7th edition, 2015.
3. Sharma N, Ooi JL, Ong J et al. The use of fenofibrate in the management of patients with diabetic retinopathy: an evidence-based review. 2015 Vol 44.No6, 367-370.

Biography

Christolyn Raj is an ophthalmologist who specializes in retinal disease and is director of Sunbury Eye Surgeons in Melbourne. She is also affiliated with The University of Melbourne Australia holding a Senior Lecturer position. Her interest in congenital eye disease spans years of research and she also holds a degree in Medicine and Public Health. She is involved in hosting several educational seminars focusing on public health implications of chronic eye disease and what needs to be done to address this in the clinical setting. Her education focus is not limited to the medical arena; she has been involved in lecture series to allied health students and professionals as well as the general public and early graduates of the University of Melbourne. A passion of hers is the arts and this topic takes an innovative approach on how the visual impact of eye conditions is a 'real problem' in our society and current approaches on how we through science and medicine can look to improve our treatment of such conditions.

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