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Free eye exams provide quality of life for seniors

Aimed at those over 65 who have not seen an eye doctor in 3 years

BY J. MILES LAYTON

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The America Seniors EyeCare Program provides eye exams for qualified senior citizens.

"So many people are not aware they are in the early stages of eye diseases," said Dr. V.K. Raju, an ophthalmologist with the Monongalia Eye Clinic. "I encourage senior citizens to have an eye examination. There is nothing worse than having eye problems or even going blind later in life."

This year-round program is designed for seniors, ages 65 and

EYECARE AMERICA is a public-service program of the Foundation of the American Academy of Ophthalmology. The Seniors EyeCare Program is co-sponsored by the Knights of Templar Eye Foundation. For more information, contact the program at (800) 222-EYES (3297).

older, who have not seen an ophthalmologist — a medical eye doctor — in three or more years. Eligible patients will be matched with a nearby volunteer ophthalmologist. Seniors receive a comprehensive medical eye examination and up to one year of care for any disease diagnosed during the initial visit at no out-of-pocket cost.

Raju is one of 51 EyeCare volunteers serving the state.

"This could help diagnose cataracts, glaucoma, macular degeneration and other eye problems that afflict senior citizens," Raju said. "A lot of these can be treated if diagnosed early enough."

Ophthalmologists who volunteered their services for the program have agreed to waive Medicare or other insurance co-payments and unmet deductibles, resulting in no out-of-pocket cost to the patient.

"Some people are afraid to come to the doctor because of financial constraints," Raju said. "This way, these people will have access to the eye care they need. The ability to see is very important. Without it, life is harder and tougher. It is important to take care of your eyes."

Seniors without insurance receive care at no cost. Raju said there have been 4,324 people helped through EyeCare America in West Virginia.

Barbara Howard, 66, of Westover, is planning to visit the Monongalia Eye Clinic to have an exam within a couple of weeks and use the program.

"My eyesight is not as good as it used to be," she said. "I've worn glasses since I was 21 years old. I'll have my eyes checked, probably for a new eyeglass prescription, so yes, this program is wonderful."

Joe Neal, 85, of Morgantown, wants to see better.

"It's important to have your eyes checked," he said. "The program helped me out a lot. My eyes could be better."