

For many cataract patients, new 'multifocal' lens implants are

A clear improvement



ALAN DEVORSEY / Staff

Immediate results: Babs MacRae-Hall of Westminster no longer needs glasses. She had outpatient cataract surgery.

By Mike Foley
 STAFF WRITER
 mfoley@greenvillenews.com

If you live long enough you'll get a cataract, or two. It starts slowly, usually when people get into their 60s. One or both eyes start to cloud as their lenses — which work like a camera lens and are located just behind the iris, the colored part of the eye — harden and become dense.

Light can't travel through as well and a clear picture can't be sent to the retina to be processed and sent through the optic nerve to the brain.

The bottom line: You can't see as well as you used to.

That's what happened to Babs MacRae-Hall. In August, the active 72-year-old from Westminster went to her eye doctor because she thought she needed new glasses. As it turned out, she had cataracts.

Dr. Joe Parisi of Clemson & Greenville Ophthalmology told her about several proce-

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dures to replace the lenses in her eyes. After hearing those options, MacRae-Hall chose a ReStor lens, which if the literature and Parisi's experience with other patients held true, meant she could restore her sight.

She had outpatient surgery on each eye at Oconee Memorial Hospital, one week apart.

The difference in her sight, she says, was immediate. She had to wear an eye patch for about an hour after each surgery.

"When I took it off at home, everything was so clear, so bright, so much better," she said. "It's truly a remarkable procedure."

MacRae-Hall is a private nurse and she'd been wearing glasses for decades to help her read and do up-close work. Since the operation, she

hasn't needed her glasses at all.

"It's a whole new world out there," she said. "Before the signs on the highway were fuzzy; now they're so clear."

MacRae-Hall's experience with failing eyesight as she aged is by no means unusual. Cataracts are common; in fact they are the most common cause of poor vision in America.

According to the University of Michigan Kellogg Eye Center:

■ By age 65, more than 90 percent of people have a cataract.

■ About 50 percent of people ages 75 to 85 have lost

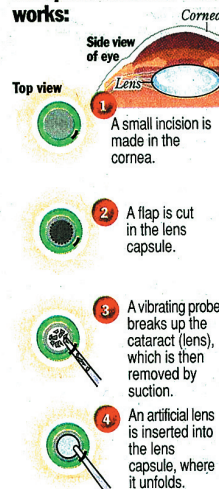
See **CATARACT** on page 4D

Cataract surgery

Have you had cataract surgery? Log in and share your experience at:

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How phacoemulsification works:



Source: Steen-Hall Eye Institute, Clinical Reinsio
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Continued
 on back

CATARACT

FROM PAGE 1D.

some vision because of a cataract.

In the United States, cataract surgery is the most frequent therapeutic procedure performed on people ages 65 and older. More than 2 million cataract procedures are performed in the United States every year.

■ Cataracts are the most common cause of blindness in the world, although the condition is treatable.

It's no wonder medical science has spent tons of money on research on cataracts and procedures to restore vision. One of the best options is implanting artificial lenses to replace the damaged lens. The first such procedure occurred in 1949, and science has been improving the technology ever since.

The demand is certainly there, fueled largely by baby boomers. The 80 million Americans born from 1946 to 1964 are now reaching the age when cataracts become a common problem. The first wave — 3.2

million baby boomers — turns 62 next year.

"It's pretty typical for people in their early 60s and on into their 70s to get cataracts," said Parisi, of Greenville Ophthalmology. "They also get presbyopia."

Presbyopia starts earlier than cataracts, usually at about age 40. Most people notice they have to move books or newspapers farther away in order to read them. And small objects require brighter light. It's often the first time that some people will need glasses.

"No one wants the sign of aging," he said, "having to put reading glasses on."

In the 1990s, the first multifocal implants were used on patients. Those allowed patients with cataracts to restore their long-distance vision.

"But we couldn't do anything about seeing up-close," Parisi said. "The image quality was not too good. A lot of surgeons put them in and then had to take them out due to patient unhappiness."

That led to innovations and the creation of multifocal lenses. The idea, Parisi said, was to im-

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prove vision and allow people to not wear glasses at all.

"This new generation of multifocal lenses was a totally different optical technology," he said, about three manufacturers' lenses that received FDA approval in early 2005.

"It drew on technology from telescopes and microscopes." The end result was that a lot more patients could not only have cataracts removed to clear their vision; they also could get rid of their reading glasses after the outpatient surgery.

Parisi said he found the ReStor lens by Alcon led to about an 80 percent "spectacle-free-dom rate." That compared with about one-third for other lenses.

"ReStor has become the most popular multifocal lens on the market," he said, with more than 75 percent of the market share. The market would be even

larger, Parisi said, if Medicare participants could get full coverage for the lenses. Currently Medicare only pays for monofocal. Any additional costs for multifocal must be paid by the patient.

At about \$2,400 per eye, Parisi said the permanent implantation surgery, the lens itself and follow-up care is not cheap. But, the success is so promising that even people who don't have cataracts are having the surgery just so they can get rid of their glasses.

"That's called a clear lens exchange," he said. "While that's being done, that's clearly more of a niche right now." Not everyone is a suitable candidate for the surgery, Parisi said. But generally, people who have a "healthy eye" outside of the cataract are likely qualified.

Those with symptoms such as macular degeneration, corneal scars or other severe eye problems probably could not have a ReStor implant.

"What we're using now is already the second generation of the ReStor lens," Parisi said. "The technology is changing rapidly."



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