



Sight to behold

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MEDICAL WRITER

CONRAD Zimmerman's bright blue eyes have blurred with time. Not surprising given that he's 100 years old but four years ago they were so bad he couldn't see his hand in front of his face.

Regardless of age, blindness is debilitating but in the elderly, especially people who live on their own, it can be life threatening.

A misplaced step, a trip over a carpet's edge, a dropped spoon can lead to a graceless fall, a broken hip and death — a death preventable had that person's sight been better.

In a series of quiet rooms tucked away at Princess Alexandra Hospital in Brisbane, scientific fridges fringe sterile rooms where corneas and scleras are separated from whole eyes and prepared for storage in the Queensland Eye Bank.

These corneas will be held at the bank for up to seven days and scleras (the whites of the eye) for up to one year until they are needed for a transplant — a transplant that will change the lives of both young and old.

Twenty years ago, eye surgeon Lawrie Hirst had returned to Queensland, bringing with him the experience of many years working at major US hospitals and universities after specialising in eye surgery.

Eventually, thanks to financial help from the Prevent Blindness Foundation and many other organisations including Lions International, his dream was realised and the bank opened its doors and this year reached a remarkable milestone when the number of donors in Queensland crossed the 5000 mark.

Today, Professor Hirst is the chief executive of the Queensland Eye Institute, also funded by the foundation, and is one of the state's principal eye tissue transplant surgeons.

He said between 400 and 500 people a year benefited from the eye bank.

"The purpose of the eye bank is to retrieve eye tissue, evaluate it, look at it and make sure it's healthy, process it, store it and then distribute it to doctors and hospitals in Queensland and northern NSW where patients will receive it as a transplant," Professor Hirst said.

There are two main reasons for corneal tissue transplants.

The first is keratoconus or conical cornea. It's a disease that occurs mainly in people aged in their mid teens through to their 30s when the normally regularly curved cornea is distorted into a shape like the end of a football and needs to be removed and transplanted with a healthy cornea.

The second reason is a disease of the elderly, Fuchs' dystrophy, where the cornea thickens and grows cloudy and vision is severely affected.

Professor Hirst said many people were unaware they could donate eye tissue, almost regardless of age or the reason for death.

"We get notified about deaths in the public hospital system and when we get notified we will, after certain investigations, contact the relatives of the deceased and ask for permission as to whether they would be happy to donate their deceased's eye tissue and about 60 per cent of the time the relatives will say yes," he said.

"When I was doing the calls, about a third of the people we called were so surprised that we actually could use grandma's 80-year-old eyes even though she wore glasses or had her cataracts removed — although they were in bereavement, and I'm not saying they were happy, but they were just delighted that something useful was going to come out of this death."

Mr Zimmerman is one of the more than 10,000 eye tissue transplant recipients who is grateful to the anonymous donor who helped him maintain his independence.

"Without the transplant I would probably have had to go to a nursing home," Mr Zimmerman said at the Holland Park home he has lived in for more than 50 years.

More than being a life saver, Mr Zimmerman's corneal transplant gave him back his lifestyle.

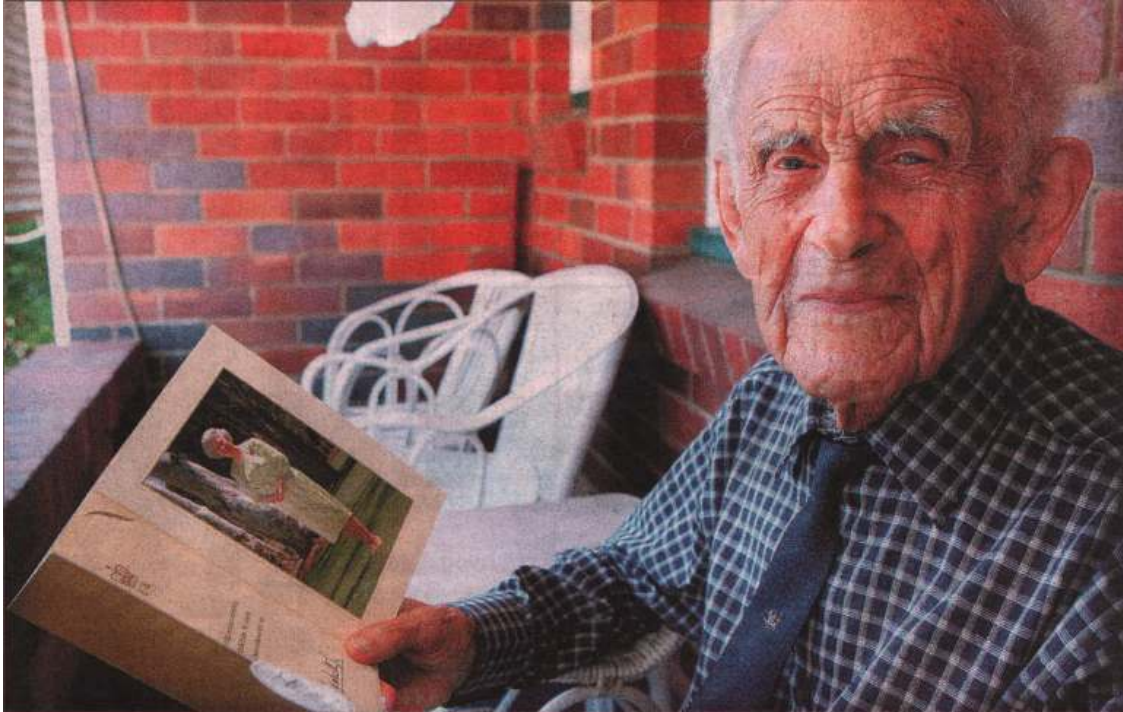
He can now watch television, his window on the world, and reading the paper is no longer impossible.

Most importantly, when he received his card from Queen Elizabeth II on the occasion of his 100th birthday on December 13 last year, he was able to read her well wishes without his glasses.

A sight indeed for sore eyes.



A WONDERFUL vision ... a corneal tissue transplant.



BRIGHT eyes . . . Conrad Zimmerman, 100, has regained his independence after his corneal transplant four years ago. Picture: Mark Calleja