



Life halved when I went blind..I had to find things to fill it

Exclusive Rosemary Smyth got an eye infection when she returned from a trip to Africa, she was later diagnosed with AMD – a condition which is the leading cause of blindness in Ireland **By Maeve Quigley**

ROSEMARY Smyth had already lost an eye to an infection when she started to notice something was wrong with the other one.

And when she was diagnosed with Age-related Macular Degeneration, she had to face the fact she would soon be registered blind.

Rosemary said: "I had some kind of infection when I came back from Africa after getting married and they think it was something I picked up there.

"I went blind in one eye more or less overnight but it had to be removed after a few years as it did not look very nice and I was getting infections in it.

"I got fitted with a plastic one but then 18 years ago I started noticing something was wrong with the other eye. I was picking up the weekly shop and I couldn't read the road signs.

"So I went to see about it and was told I had a macular hole and nothing could be done about it.

"I couldn't drive any more and I had to be registered blind. It meant a whole new way of life.

"I was told I wouldn't lose my sight completely and I would always have peripheral vision.

"I can't see my husband's face

across the table any more, I can't see my own face to make it up in

the mirror, I can't do my nails and I can't read or write legibly.

"I can't see things through shop windows and can't read price tags on things without great difficulty.

"Life seemed halved in many ways so I had to find other things to fill it."

Rosemary's case is not extraordinary – AMD affects one in 10 Irish people over 50 and is the leading cause of blindness in the country.

The disease attacks the macula of the eye, where our sharpest central vision occurs.

Although it rarely results in complete blindness, it robs the individual of all but peripheral vision, leaving only dim images or black holes at the centre of vision.

There is no cure but early detection and treatment can help slow the degeneration and loss of sight.

This week is AMD Awareness week and Novartis, supported by the National Council for the Blind in Ireland, Fighting Blindness and the Association of Optometrists in Ireland, are working to increase public awareness on how to spot symptoms and to highlight that early referral is key.

Dara Kilmartin, Ophthalmic

Surgeon at the Eye & Ear Hospital in Dublin said it is of the utmost importance that people who think they might have AMD are treated

early. He added: "Treatment options have dramatically improved in the past few years.

"Thankfully the treatments available for AMD can improve patients' sight but it is important that AMD is treated quickly."

Patrick Quinn from Fighting Blindness said too many people are losing their sight by not getting treatment early enough.

He added: "We know that only a quarter of those diagnosed with AMD in Ireland every year are reaching centres where they can be treated on time. The consequence of this means many Irish people are losing useful vision that can lead to a better quality of life unnecessarily.

"Fortunately significant work is being undertaken in Ireland to educate the public on the importance of regular eye examinations and the treatment options available to them."

Rosemary has not let the illness destroy her life but she knows only too well that others cannot cope with losing their sight.

She said: "It was as if my life was halved when I was diagnosed. But I have found other things to fill the gap left by this.

"I actually feel more fulfilled these days in many ways."

Rosemary helped set up MIST – a support group for people with Macular degeneration or loss of central vision.

She said: "Through that I trained as a peer counsellor with the NCBI and learned to use a computer which I never had before.

"And I've done a couple of home study courses with the aid of a CCTV reader."

DUBLINER Rosemary, who is in her 60s, now counsels people who are going through the same things she experienced.

She said: "I think the hardest thing is for families to understand as you look as though there is nothing wrong with you at all.

"People don't understand why you can't

suddenly do something. It's very difficult for friends and family to cope with.

"And when you are registered blind people are inclined to walk away from you.

"It is certainly one way to find out who your friends are and it takes a lot of effort to get through. You have to grieve for your sight. Then you have to accept it and look for ways of improving your position in life.

"And a lot of older people who get diagnosed in their 60s don't really have the energy.

"They are not used to technology and they find it very difficult so they get frightened about what will happen in the future.

"I was lucky as I was able to prepare myself for what has happened now.

"I find it difficult some days - I have the screaming abdabs occasionally but you have to get on with it and get over it.

"I took up playing bowls, I have the most beautiful guide dog Clint and he has made my life an easier place to be. I also do a lot of talks in schools and I really enjoy it.

Rosemary has now joined Toastmasters and gives her own speeches.

She also paints silk scarves and leads an active life.

And Rosemary said she has never let the condition get the better of her.

She added: "I used to knit Aran jumpers and sew a lot and that was something I thought I wasn't going to be able to do.

"But in the end I knitted another Aran for my 10-year-old grand-daughter. It took me a very long time but I did it in the end and I am very proud and pleased about that.

"I reckon if you want to do something badly enough then you will find a way."

But Rosemary wants others to understand the importance of getting regular eye tests to help save your sight.

She said: "Getting your eyes checked regularly is so important as the degeneration can be halted with different treatments. But early detection is the key."

mirror anymore

If you want to do something badly enough you will find a way



If you think you could be experiencing the early symptoms of AMD, visit www.amd.ie for the list of free testing centres.

I can't see my own face in the



COMPANIONS
Rosemary Smyth
with her beloved
guide dog Clint



▲ **JOY** With Clint & AOI's Lynda McGivney-Nolan