

Experimental treatment helps Southwest Florida patients see more clearly

By Staff Reports

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NAPLES — Greg Anderson had no qualms about being a test case.

At worst, vision in his right eye would stay blurry, perhaps putting him on a course toward blindness in that eye.

At best, good vision he once enjoyed would return.

The Punta Gorda resident is happy he didn't hesitate to sign up for a clinical trial of an experimental treatment for blurry vision caused by central retinal vein occlusion. That's a condition where a blockage or obstruction of veins in the retina causes blurriness and profound decrease in vision. Predisposing factors are heart disease, hypertension, high blood pressure and diabetes.

Retina Consultants of Southwest Florida became a site for a nationwide trial of an injection-based treatment for macular edema or swelling usually caused by retinal vein occlusion and central retina vein occlusion. The treatment has recently been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Called Ozurdex, the drug therapy is the first to gain approval for treating the eye disease that afflicts as many as 800,000 people or more annually in the United States, said Dr. Joseph Walker, an ophthalmologist with the eye practice in Southwest Florida. Retina Consultants is active with numerous clinical trials.

"To me, it's a fantastic drug," Anderson said. "I can never say enough. I wouldn't hesitate to take a chance to save my eyesight."

Walker said Ozurdex should be on the market in the next few months. Medicare is expected to cover the treatment yet it is unknown at this time how it will be priced for insurance coverage, he said.

"We found for vein occlusion patients, 20 to 30 percent get significant vision improvement," he said. "Probably one out of three patients had fairly substantial improvements."

The therapy involves a steroid, dexamethasone. The California-based Allergan Inc. developed a bio-degradable casing for gradual release of the steroid to the retina to reduce the macular edema. In clinical studies, patients achieved an average vision improvement of three lines on an eye chart.

Retina Consultants had nine patients enrolled in the clinic trial that was done in two stages and involved 1,300 people nationwide at 60 sites.

Ozurdex is an injectable therapy where the eye is numbed and the medication is inserted. The injection is placed inside the cavity in the back of the eye that holds a jelly-like substance that fills the rear two-thirds of the eye.

“It comes out in a little strip, like a miniature fragment of toothpaste,” Walker said. “If we look at it, you can see a little white seed, like a sesame seed.”

Once the eye is numbed, the whole procedure takes about five minutes, with the patient feeling a little pinch for the numbing, he said.

Anderson, the Punta Gorda resident, said he felt nothing. When he first agreed to take part in the study, he got a placebo. A second time he got the real thing.

“There was no pain but you can see it float by every once in a while,” he said.

He had Ozurdex injected two years ago and it has long ago dissolved but he has had no need for a follow-up injection so far.

A few years ago, he suddenly started experiencing blurry vision in his right eye. His eye doctor immediately diagnosed his condition and referred him that same day to Retina Consultants. The specialists watched him for six months because there was nothing on the market to address his central retina vein occlusion. At the time, Anderson was a construction manager.

“It was fuzzy and extremely blurry and non-functional,” he said of his right eye.

Dr. Glenn Wing, with Retina Consultants, suggested he take part in the study when the practice started enrolling patients. After getting the real drug in the trial instead of a placebo, his vision began improving in 48 hours.

“It is 20/25 and maintained,” Anderson said. “I’ve had zero recurrence.”

“We are very excited about Ozurdex,” Wing said. “It has the potential to save the vision of countless patients who otherwise would not have treatment options and potentially lose vision.”



