

'Working together across London for people with a visual impairment'

LVIF E-Bulletin: 27 May 2020

Please send articles for inclusion to: lvif@londonvision.org

NB: The views and opinions expressed in this bulletin are those of the contributors. They do not purport to reflect the opinions or views of the LVIF or its members.

2020 meeting dates are:

Friday 26 June

Friday 11 September

Friday 11 December

Introduction

Welcome to our latest edition of the bulletin. I thought I would take this opportunity to mention that our next meeting of the forum is scheduled for 10:15 on Friday 26 June and we are proposing to hold it via Microsoft Teams. More details will be shared in due course. Can I also remind members to note the change of date for our September forum which had to be moved from 25 September to 11 September. Enjoy the issue.

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MEDICAL RESEARCH

Article 1: New type of cell could be used to reverse sight loss

A study in the United States has demonstrated that fibroblasts (cells involved in healing after injury) could be reprogrammed into light-sensitive photoreceptor-like cells and used to reverse sight loss, according to a report in the journal Nature.

The research team, based at the University of North Texas Health Science Centre and the National Eye Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, used a set of five small molecules to chemically transform the cells.

It takes up to six months to create replacement photoreceptor cells from stem cells. This new technique may re-programme photoreceptor-like cells within 10 days.

The research was conducted in mice bred to have retinal degeneration, and the team is now focused on preparing to begin research in people.

Commenting on the work at the NEI, Dr Anand Swaroop said: "This is the first study to show that direct, chemical reprogramming can produce retinal-like cells, which gives us a new and faster strategy for developing therapies

for age-related macular degeneration (AMD) and other retinal disorders caused by the loss of photoreceptors.”

The researchers admit that there are still hurdles to overcome before this technology could restore the sight of people with macular disease: only a small proportion of fibroblasts are converted into photoreceptors, and they do not spread out across the retina to repair larger areas of damage.

In the paper, the researchers concluded that: “Although Chemically induced Photoreceptor-like Cells (CiPCs) have therapeutic potential, a lack of proliferation – as is the case for native photoreceptors – and low conversion efficiency are the main impediments for a translational application. We anticipate that optimisation of our current protocol may be beneficial for obtaining large numbers of CiPCs. Overall, CiPCs are a promising cell-replacement candidates.

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Article 2: Researchers develop an early warning system for AMD

Researchers have found a way to predict whether people with wet age-related macular degeneration (AMD) will go onto develop the disease in their other eye.

Using artificial intelligence (AI) researchers at Moorfields Eye Hospital and UCL Institute of Ophthalmology have found a way to see if patients are likely to develop the condition in what they often call their 'good eye' - up to six months ahead of time.

It is very common that patients develop wet AMD in one eye and start receiving treatment, before later developing it in their other eye.

The AI system developed by Moorfields, DeepMind, and Google Health, may allow closer monitoring of the 'good eye' in patients at high risk, or even be used as a guide for use of preventative treatments in the future.

However, the system will not be used in clinics, but to help plan clinical trials in preventative therapies.

Pearse Keane, consultant ophthalmologist at Moorfields Eye Hospital, said: “Patients who have lost vision from wet AMD are often particularly worried

that their “good eye” will become affected and, as a result, that they will become blind. We hope that this AI system can be used as an early warning system for this condition and thus help preserve sight.”

Pearse Keane said the system can't be used for other types of macular disease and is specific to patients with wet AMD only.

He added: "With this work, we haven't solved AMD, but we believe we have found another big piece of the puzzle."

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STUDIES AND SURVEYS

Article 1: Guide Dogs survey on the impact of COVID-19

A message from the Guide Dogs campaigns team:

“Guide Dogs wants to understand how COVID-19 has impacted the lives of people with vision impairment. We're working with the University of Nottingham to collect your experiences to inform our services, policies and campaigns:

[Take part now](#)

This short survey is open till 7th of June. Please let us know if you have any questions or would like to arrange to complete this survey via telephone. Please share these details with anyone you know with sight loss who may be able to contribute to this important work.”

Please note the Guide Dogs campaign team did not include a telephone number but they can be contacted by email:
campaigns@guidedogs.org.uk

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Article 2: Save the Red Button Service

Do you use the BBC Red Button Service?

The BBC is gathering insights into how their Red Button Service is used by people with sight loss and the value they attach to this service. If you would like to join the focus group, please email broadcasting@rnib.org.uk

Please note this concerns the visual text service as opposed to the Red Button TV channel.

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CHARITIES AND CAMPAIGNS

Article 1: RNIB raises concerns over pop-up cycle ways

The Government has announced £250m for changes to street design to encourage more walking and cycling.

However, it's important these changes are made in a way that keeps streets accessible for blind and partially sighted people.

[Take our survey](#)

<https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/travel-transport>

Changes included in the announcement are accelerated roll-out of e-scooters – which could be with us as early as June – pop up cycleways, and widened pavements. The intention is to encourage more people to walk and cycle while social distancing measures are in place.

While it's great news that more people will be walking and cycling to work, and there'll be less pollution in the air, we want to make sure this new programme of work is thought through and accessibility is maintained for blind and partially sighted people:

- Where pavements are extended out into the road, the surface of the pavement along with the kerb should be physically extended. This would enable all pedestrians to detect and use the increased pedestrian space.
- Where pop-up cycle lanes are introduced, signage should be placed on the road/cycle lane, not on the pavement, and there should always be a detectable kerb between vehicles – including bikes – and pedestrians.

- Where e-scooters are trialled, they should never be allowed on pavements and this must be robustly enforced to ensure pedestrians are not put at risk.
- Where any changes to street layouts or routes have been made, these changes must be communicated in an accessible way to the blind and partially sighted people who live locally.

We are particularly concerned that E-Scooters are being rolled out without us having been able to raise concerns from the blind and partially sighted community about these vehicles. We have been compiling evidence on this and are disappointed that this has not been taken into account when making this decision.

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Article 2: COVID-19 Living in a lockdown

London is proving very challenging for the more than two hundred thousand blind and partially sighted people living in the capital, with younger people being particularly affected.

New research carried out by the Vision Foundation shows that the lockdown is compounding the exclusion, isolation and anxiety already faced by many blind and partially sighted people. Measures such as social distancing mean that the usual support isn't available to allow people to get around taking away autonomy and independence. Younger people, living on their own without a local support network in place, describe feeling the loss of control and isolation acutely, with delays in securing the relevant technology and support for homeworking increasing the stress. Access to key services, such as shopping deliveries, has been a problem for many although local shops are now finding ways to cope with this, while supermarkets try to find a solution

Our research has found that organisations which support the visually impaired community in London are working hard to stay in touch with their members and adapt their services to suit different needs. We have committed £100K to the London Community Response Fund to support essential community organisations to ensure they can adapt and innovate quickly and effectively. We're also offering free fundraising and income generation advice and hands-on pro bono support to enable small, local sight loss charities to access emergency funding opportunities. In line with

our aim to make London a shining example of a sight loss city, we have written a joint letter with RNIB to the Mayor of London to draw his attention to the challenges faced in the current crisis and launched a new social media campaign Blind Lockdown Life.

Read the full article at
www.visionfoundation.org.uk/news

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Article 3: Asking the Experts with Nystagmus Network

The Nystagmus Network recently asked a group of their supporters what questions they would most like to put to nystagmus researchers. Then they found two researchers to answer them: Helena Lee, a Consultant Paediatric Ophthalmologist at University of Southampton and Jay Self, a Consultant Paediatric Ophthalmologist, also at University of Southampton.

To read all nine questions and all their answers in full, please click or tap below to visit the Nystagmus Network blog:

<https://nystagmusnetwork.org/blog/>

Nystagmus Network is offering a further opportunity for people to put their questions about nystagmus research. Visit their web site for more details.

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OTHER NEWS

Article 1: Help for people with diabetes during coronavirus outbreak

People living with diabetes face a significantly higher risk of dying with COVID-19 with a third of deaths in England associated with the condition, according to new NHS research.

The health service in England has called on people with diabetes to access help available to them, including a new dedicated helpline and online tools to help manage the condition during the outbreak.

Due to be published this week, the world-leading studies reveal that people living with type 1 diabetes are at three and a half times the risk, and people living with type 2 are at double the risk of dying in hospital with the virus, compared to people without diabetes.

[More....](#)

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Article 2: Guidance for optical settings

On 10 May 2020, the prime minister announced the conditional plan to ease restrictions. All optical guidance remains unchanged.

The temporary cessation of routine optical services addresses the safety of patients and of optical teams as well as supporting the public health measures required to slow community transmission of COVID-19. This advice has not changed. The most recent [guidance](#) letter for optical staff is available on the NHS England website.

www.england.nhs.uk/coronavirus

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Article 3: **Accessible TV licence information**

RNIB has been working with the BBC to include accessibility in TV Licence staff training.

We're really pleased to hear that our supporters' experiences of inaccessibility in the TV Licence payments process will now be incorporated into TV Licensing's official staff training.

It's to avoid repeating issues which have meant it's been difficult for blind and partially sighted people to claim the 50% discount on their TV Licence.

For example, in the past automated menus haven't explained how to apply for the discount, advisers have been unaware of this option and staff have asked customers with sight loss to read out printed materials.

This development is hugely positive and shows how blind and partially sighted people sharing their experiences can encourage companies to change. Please do keep letting us know when you struggle to access services because of accessibility.

Sonali Rai, RNIB's broadcaster relationship and AD technology manager, added:

It is encouraging to see the BBC responding promptly to what our customers have said and taking action to ensure there is awareness of the needs of people with sight loss, it's important that all essential services take note of the accessibility requirements of their customers.

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End of Bulletin