

Press Release
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For information contact:
Annie Kuhl, Public Relations
314-428-4373 ext. 107

Heartland Lions Eye Banks Participates in Nationwide Study Showing that Older Corneas are Suitable for Transplantation

Results Could Expand Donor Pool Significantly

ST. LOUIS (April 1, 2008) -- The Heartland Lions Eye Banks (HLEB) participated in a study indicating that corneal transplants using tissue from older donors have similar rates of survival to those using tissue from younger donors. The five-year transplant success rate for recipients was the same – 86 percent – for transplants performed across the nation with corneas from donors ages 12 to 65 years and from donors ages 66 to 75. Because of this new finding, the donor age pool—currently limited to donors 65 and younger—should be expanded to include donors up to 75 years of age. These are the conclusions of a study funded by the National Eye Institute (NEI) of the National Institutes of Health and published in the April issue of *Ophthalmology*.

The availability of donor corneas has been adequate for the past 10 years in the United States, where more than 33,000 corneal transplants are performed each year. However, recent changes in Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations will likely cause a decrease in the supply of donated corneas. These new regulations require additional screening and testing of potential donors for contagious diseases, registration of eye banks, more detailed records and labels, and stricter quarantine procedures. In addition, many eye banks previously set the age limit for donors at 65 years or younger because some surgeons have been reluctant to use older corneas. The findings from the new study could lessen these restrictive policies.

“This pivotal study indicates that corneas from older individuals are just as successful when used for transplants as those from younger donors,” said Ron Walkenbach, Ph.D., Executive Director of HLEB. “These study results will expand the donor cornea pool and make the scheduling of transplant procedures easier for both surgeons and patients.”

HLEB is one of 80 sites that participated in the Cornea Donor Study (CDS) and helped bring together more than 1,101 participants and 105 surgeons from across the United States. Participants from HLEB were between 40 and 80 years of age and were chosen for the study if they were in need of a corneal transplant for a corneal disease that put them at moderate risk for clouding of the transplanted cornea. After the transplant surgery, the participants were followed for five years. The transplant was considered a failure if a repeat corneal transplant was required or if the cornea was cloudy for at least three months. Donor corneas were provided by 43 participating eye banks. All donor corneas met Eye Bank Association of America standards for human corneal

transplantation and were consistent with eye banks' tissue ratings of good to excellent quality.

“The pressure on eye banks to provide corneas is increasing,” said Paul A. Sieving, M.D., Ph.D., director of NEI. “The results of this study will expand the available donor pool and should persuade surgeons to use corneas from older donors. These changes will greatly benefit the growing number of individuals who need corneal transplants.”

As a national leader in eye health care HLEB continues its longstanding tradition of excellence in corneal transplantation. During 2007, HLEB's seven branches in Missouri, Illinois and Kansas provided tissue for 1,876 cornea transplants. HLEB also furthered its sight-saving work by providing 1,456 tissues for vital research on cures for blinding eye diseases.

Overall, the demand for organs and tissue is greater than the supply available for transplantation. In the United States, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) oversees the federal government's Organ Donor Program. This program is designed to increase awareness of the critical need for organ and tissue donors. For more information, go to <http://www.organdonor.gov/>.

Additional support for CDS was provided by: Eye Bank Association of America, Bausch & Lomb, Inc., Tissue Banks International, Vision Share, Inc., San Diego Eye Bank, The Cornea Society, Katena Products, Inc., ViroMed Laboratories, Inc., Midwest Eye-Banks (Michigan Eye-Bank, Illinois Eye-Bank), Konan Medical Corporation, Eye Bank for Sight Restoration, SightLife, Sight Society of Northeastern New York (Lions Eye Bank of Albany), and Lions Eye Bank of Oregon.

Heartland Lions Eye Banks are a division of the Missouri Lions Eye Research Foundation, a statewide 501(c)3 corporation based out of Columbia, Mo., with the mission to preserve and restore eyesight through the work of its community programs and eye bank operations. The Missouri Lions Eye Research Foundation programs include: Amblyopia Prevention Screening, Eye Care Assistance, Glaucoma Detection Screening, Eyeglass Recycling, Heartland Lions Eye Banks and support of ocular research. For more information on our programs, please visit www.mlerf.org or www.hleb.org.

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