

Photo by Jim Harper

When retired North Brunswick High School principal Bob Harris greets visitors at his West Street home, he can now distinguish who the guests are thanks to a telescopic implant that is helping to eliminate the effects of his macular degeneration.

Hope for macular degeneration patients

Southport retiree first to receive new eye implant

By Terry Pope
Associate Editor

As a high school teacher, coach and principal, not much escaped the watchful eyes of career educator Bob Harris. Yet later, in retirement, the Southport resident noticed something was happening to his eyesight. Utility poles began to look crooked to him, and normal picket fences seemed wavy and out of shape.

The diagnosis threw the history buff for a loop. While Harris is no longer preparing lesson plans or evaluating teachers, he is still an avid reader.

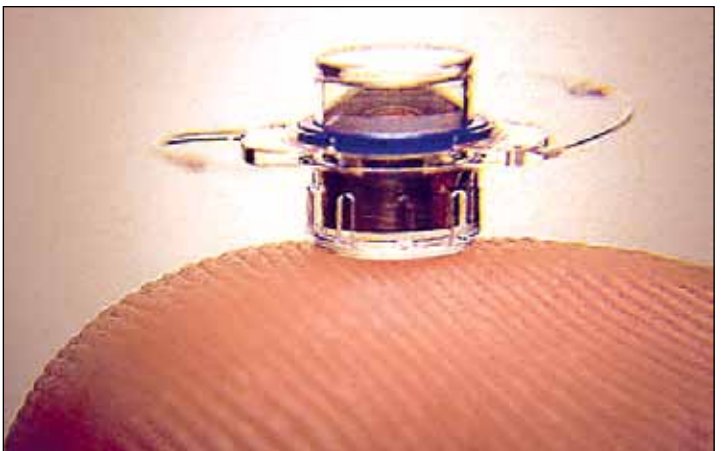
Volumes of books lining the shelves of his West Street home sat idle as age-related macular degeneration (AMD) slowly invaded his vision.

While reading the newspaper several years ago, Harris saw where a new FDA-approved procedure was offering hope to macular degeneration patients at the University of California-Davis. Harris continued his treatment for the eye disease under a team of local doctors.

"I didn't think anything more about that," said Harris, but he kept what he had read in the back of his mind.

This past spring, retina specialist Dr. Robert Brownlow referred Harris to low-vision specialist Dr. Edward Paul of Landfall Eye. Harris said he was placed on a simulator to show him how his vision could improve if he agreed to a first-of-its-kind telescope implant from CentraSight, a new care program for patients with end-stage AMD. It was what Harris had read about in the newspaper several years before.

"It was left up to me if I wanted to go along with it," said Har-



No larger than the size of a pea, the telescopic device is implanted in the eye to magnify objects three times larger than normal vision.

ris, who on April 24 became the first person in North Carolina to undergo the procedure. The pea-sized telescope was implanted in his eye during a one-hour surgery at Novant Health Brunswick Medical Center near Supply.

The CentraSight treatment program requires prospective patients to undergo medical, visual and functional evaluation to determine if he or she may be a good candidate for the surgery. It is the only medical or surgical option that improves visual acuity by reducing the impact of the central vision blind spot caused by end-stage AMD.

The procedure is eligible for Medicare coverage. The telescope implant, which costs around \$15,000, uses micro-optical technology to magnify images that would normally be seen in one's straight-ahead or central vision. The images are projected onto the healthy portion of the retina not affected by the disease, making it possible for the patient to see and discern objects within

their central vision.

Harris graded-out as an ideal candidate for surgery, and now four months after his procedure the CentraSight implant in his right eye is changing his eyesight—and his quality of life.

"When I first came out of surgery, it was like looking through brown cellophane and it was blurry," said Harris. "When they took two stitches out, it was like looking through clear cellophane, but blurry."

After a couple more months, when surgeon Dr. Laura Harris of Cataract Consultants (no relation to Bob Harris) removed two more stitches the cellophane appearance was gone. It is an eight-month process of seeing slow improvement and adhering to a weekly therapy regimen that leads to training the eyes to adjust and letting the implant do its magic.

For now, the improvement is rather dramatic, said Harris.

"Everything is brighter," he
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Photos by Jim Harper

Southport retiree Bob Harris explains how the CentraSight implant acts as a telescope in his right eye and helps to reduce the blind spot macular degeneration patients experience.



Following surgery, it takes months of training the eyes to adjust to the device with the help of an in-home therapist. Here, Harris demonstrates how he uses charts to view objects, letters and numbers from set distances as part of his exercise.

Harris is no longer going through life in a cloud following eye implant surgery

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said. "Before the operation, I couldn't see the television. I couldn't see colors. Now, I have vivid color. When that blurriness goes, I'll be fine."

Harris bought a Kindle Fire tablet for reading, and it is bringing books, magazines and newspapers back into his world.

"I don't have too much of a problem reading that," said Harris. "I have to look slightly to the left of the line. It's something you learn. I'm looking forward to when she takes more stitches out. When I first heard about stitches, I thought, 'My God, she's going to put stitches in my eyeball!' But these are tiny things."

As a principal, Harris was a quiet leader and reserved, but had North Brunswick High School atop the charts in the Brunswick County school system. In his words, he likes to fly under the radar. Normally he would shy away from publicity, but when asked by CentraSight representatives if he would be willing to share his story to help others with AMD, Harris jumped at the opportunity.

"People need to know that there's a possibility of something that can be done for you," said Harris. "Maybe this operation isn't for everyone. If you are into instant gratification, it is not. Some people who have cataract surgery can see the next day. With this surgery, you've got to be willing to work and take some ups and downs. But what's the alternative? You can go through life in a cloud."

Since Harris had his surgery, Dr. Laura Harris has implanted the device into one other patient and has three more scheduled. Dr. Harris is one of five members on the Wilmington area team certified to offer CentraSight treatment, and she is the only cornea and cataract surgeon in the area trained to actually perform the surgery.

In addition to Dr. Harris, Dr. Paul and Dr. Brownlow, the team members who each signed off on Harris's surgery include Dr. Leon Charkoudian of Cape Fear Retina and occupational therapist Spring Harkins of Wellcare Home Health.

"This is just the beginning of what I think will become better and better treatment," said Dr. Harris, who has 15 years of cornea transplant experience. "Public demand will expand the availability and more people will be trained for this surgery. It's intriguing and rewarding as a surgeon treating a disease state that had no options until today. I'm happy that for the first time there are some treatment opportunities."

Yet, she warns, patient selection can be rather narrow. There are a number of other factors involved, including the type of AMD damage that exists and if a person can sustain the therapy that's required. Currently, patients must also be 75 years or older to qualify and meet cornea health requirements.

"These are strong people," said Dr. Harris. "And 75 is considered young today. It's a challenge to get this type of macular degeneration (because) you become dependent on other people."

Novant Health Brunswick Medical Center beat out Chapel Hill and Duke as the first to offer CentraSight implants in North Carolina, Dr. Harris said, because the local hospital figured out the complexities involved in billing and collecting for the procedure through Medicare.

Her first patient is still a couple months away from fully realizing the potential in the telescopic device and benefiting from home therapy



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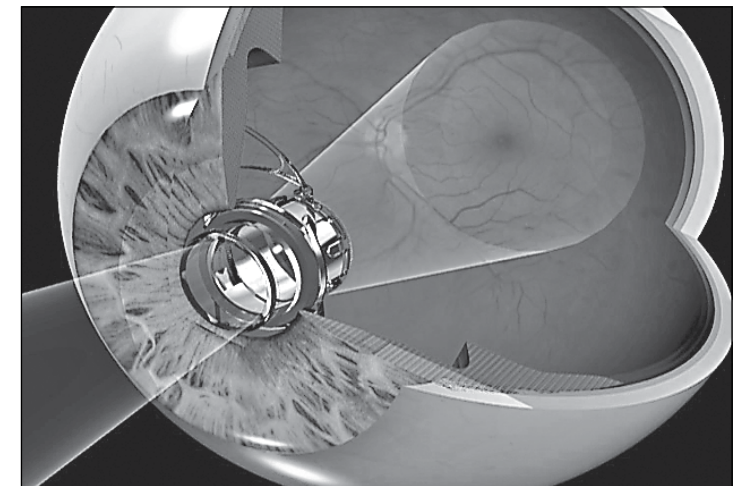
The steady hands of Dr. Laura Harris implanted the first CentraSight device into the eye of patient Bob Harris, no relation, performing the first such surgery in North Carolina.

that aids the neurological change in his functioning eyes. The device is only planted into one eye, while the two eyes must train together to eliminate that dark central vision spot that ADM patients see.

"It's a magnification of about three times more than what we normally have," said Dr. Harris. "It magnifies so much that everything else gets bigger, but that black spot macular degeneration patients see gets tiny."

ADM can be caused by genetics, lack of proper eye protection while in the sun, aging and poor nutrition. In the past, there have been very few treatment options.

"This is the first time they have hope when there has never been an option," said Dr. Harris.



Images that would normally be seen in one's straight-ahead or central vision are magnified and projected onto the healthy portion of the retina not affected by the disease, making it possible for the patient to see and discern objects within their central vision.

Low-vision specialist Dr. Paul said he is excited to be on one of the first teams in the country to offer this new technology.

"Macular degeneration is the leading cause of blindness in older adults, and more than 15-million Americans are affected by some form of ADM," said Dr. Paul. "Knowing my patients finally have an option is exciting, encouraging and rewarding."

The telescope implant is not a cure for end-stage AMD. The CentraSight company warns that as with any medical intervention, potential risks and complications exist with the telescopic implant. Possible side effects include decreased vision or vision-impairing corneal swelling.

For Bob Harris, it's been a relatively painless and encouraging operation. He will still need to wear eyeglasses once the eyes are trained, the kind that anyone with less than 20/20 vision must wear.

"I never had one pain in that eye," said Harris. "I never took one pain pill. My eyeball just feels like it's stuffed with something."

He says it's a small price to pay for fighting the effects of AMD.

"When they asked me, 'What would you like to be able to do with your vision?' I said, 'I'd like to be able to recognize the person I'm talking to beyond five feet away,'" said Harris.

Before the surgery, Harris was told he'd be the first person in North Carolina to undergo the procedure. It didn't faze him.

"It's kind of like being a guinea pig," said Harris.

For more information about the telescope implant and related treatment programs, visit online at www.CentraSight.com or call 1-877-99sight.