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LEADING CAUSE OF VISION LOSS IN AMERICA CAN BE CORRECTED WITH APPROPRIATE EYE CARE

Many May Not Be Aware of Cataract Services Available to Them

CHICAGO (July 18, 2007) – Despite the fact that cataract surgery has a 95 percent success rate, cataract is still the leading cause of blindness in the world. It affects those in developed countries as well as developing countries. It is the leading cause of low vision in the United States, contributing to half of all cases. And, Americans spend \$6.8 billion every year on direct medical costs for outpatient, inpatient and prescription drug services for cataract, according to the 2007 “Economic Impact of Vision Problems: The Toll of Major Adult Eye Disorders, Visual Impairment, and Blindness on the U.S. Economy” study funded by Prevent Blindness America.

Cataract, which develops slowly and painlessly, is a clouding of the eye’s lens which blocks light needed for sight. With age, old cells in the lens build up and block light as it tries to pass through. The end result is cloudy or foggy vision. According to EyeCare America, more than half of those ages 65 and over have some degree of cataract.

With the increasing number of aging baby boomers, it is estimated that by the year 2020, more than 30.1 million Americans will have cataracts. More than 2.7 million Americans undergo cataract surgery annually, making it the most frequently performed surgery in the country. The surgery involves an eye doctor removing the existing lens and replacing it with an artificial intraocular lens (IOL). The IOL is implanted inside the eye and is meant to be permanent. It does not require replacement or cleaning, and only 10 percent of surgeries require an overnight hospital stay.

Many cataract patients may not know what benefits are available to them. Prevent Blindness America, the nation’s oldest eye health and safety organization, has dedicated August as Cataract Awareness Month to educate the public on the condition and how to get treatment for it.

“At some point, most of us will develop cataract, so we need to be educated now on where we can turn for help,” said Daniel D. Garrett, senior vice president of Prevent Blindness America. “Those that are insured may not know exactly how much of the treatment will be covered. And for those that aren’t, services are available for qualified individuals.”

There are currently 43 million Americans enrolled in Medicare, but many are not aware of the vision benefits they are eligible for. In relation to cataract surgery coverage, because of changes in Medicare policy in 2005, cataract patients now have a choice of receiving either basic lens replacement, paid in full by Medicare up to \$2,000, or

applying the credit to new replacement lenses that can correct farsightedness in addition to cataract removal. Prevent Blindness America has created a free fact sheet entitled "Medicare Benefits and Your Eyes" to help explain these and other vision-related Medicare policies. The group can also provide help in referring patients to public assistance programs.

"Not every cataract patient will require surgery," added Garrett. "But, for those who do, there are a number of new devices and treatments. The key is to make sure you receive regular eye care and discuss the options with your eye doctor."

Prevent Blindness America recommends that you visit your eye doctor immediately if you experience the following cataract symptoms:

- Blurred vision, double vision, ghost images, the sense of a "film" over the eyes
- Lights seem too dim for reading or close-up work, or strong lights seem to "dazzle" eyes
- Changing eyeglass prescriptions often, without experiencing improvement
- A milky or yellowish spot appears in the pupil (the center of the eye that is normally black).

For free information on cataracts in both English and Spanish, or to receive the "Your Guide to Cataract Surgery" and "Medicare Benefits and Your Eyes" fact sheets, call 1-800-331-2020 or log on to www.preventblindness.org.

About Prevent Blindness America

Founded in 1908, Prevent Blindness America is the nation's leading volunteer eye health and safety organization dedicated to fighting blindness and saving sight. Focused on promoting a continuum of vision care, Prevent Blindness America touches the lives of millions of people each year through public and professional education, advocacy, community and patient service programs and research. These services are made possible through the generous support of the American public. Together with a network of affiliates, divisions and chapters, it's committed to eliminating preventable blindness in America. For more information, or to make a contribution to the sight-saving fund, call 1-800-331-2020 or visit us on the Web at www.preventblindness.org.

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