

Your Neighbor

New medical procedure helps Somers man see again

Macular degeneration cannot keep Joe Vellone down

BY BOB DUMAS
FOR THE SOMERS RECORD

Last year 76-year-old Somers resident Joe Vellone went to a Yankee game with a friend. Unfortunately, the experience wasn't what he was hoping for.

"I hadn't been to a game in while," he said. "But I was having trouble seeing the ball. I didn't realize how bad my vision had become."

Vellone was suffering from cataracts as well as something known as macular degeneration, a progressive eye condition that affects as many as 15 million elderly Americans. The disease attacks the macula of the eye, where the sharpest central vision occurs. It slowly robs an individual of all but the outermost, peripheral vision, leaving only dim images or black holes at the center of vision.

Vellone, a big sports fan, was having trouble following his beloved New York Jets on the television. Driving was out of the question and playing cards had become difficult. Gardening—a favorite pastime—was no longer a possibility because he could not differentiate the small seeds.

"Ray Charles would have done a better job than me," Vellone quipped.

The situation left Vellone depressed and withdrawn and he ventured out less and less. But then a visit to his eye doctor last fall change things forever. The doctor told him about a new procedure designed to help people with Vellone's condition. A device known as an implantable miniature telescope (IMT) could be surgically implanted in his eyes and restore a significant portion of his vision.

"My eye doctor said I would be a perfect candidate for this," Vellone said.

That recommendation brought him to Dr. Gerald Zaidman, who works at the Westchester Medical Center and is one of the few eye surgeons in the United States trained to perform the IMT procedure.

"I went to Dr. Zaidman and he sent me to some other doctors to see if I qualified and it all took a while," Vellone recalled. "We started in September and I finally had the surgery in December."

Zaidman said qualifying patients must have both cataracts and macular degenera-



Joe Vellone at home with his wife, Ida.

PHOTO: BRYAN FUMAGALLI

tion, but there are other variables as well.

"Patients have to be aware that just because they have [cataracts and macular degeneration] doesn't necessarily make you candidate," he said. "There are different types of macular degeneration. The patient has to come to my office and make sure their eyes are otherwise healthy and there is nothing that would prevent me from inserting the device. We screen them to make sure they are a good candidate."

Zaidman said that the miniature telescope, which is smaller than a pea, was developed by research scientists in Israel about 12 years ago. It was introduced to the U.S. three years ago and approved by the FDA in late 2012.

Due to his extensive experience performing complicated eye surgery, the company that makes the IMT approached Zaidman about becoming one of the doctors who could perform the procedure.

"The surgery is extremely precise and only small number have been trained and there is just a small number of facilities where it can be performed because they have to have the

technology and equipment," Zaidman said.

Zaidman said he believes that there are only two other doctors in New York State who can perform the procedure; one in Manhattan and another upstate.

Follow-up therapy after the surgery is crucial to its success, Zaidman noted.

"This is not dissimilar to a broken leg or hip," he said. "To regain function you have to go through rehabilitation. The vision therapy team works with the patient to teach them how to work with the device. They make sure the patient can adapt."

A therapist comes to Vellone's home on a regular basis to assist with his rehab.

"It's been a little slow; I thought it would be like regular cataract surgery, but it's not," Vellone said. "You have to work at it. But without a doubt there has been an improvement."

Dr. Zaidman agrees.

"Joe is doing great," Zaidman said. "The rehab is ongoing and it's different for every patient. Some pick it up in two or three sessions and for others it may take seven

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Somers

or eight. They will get some semblance of their normal vision function. But you can't reverse macular degeneration."

Zaidman said potential patients can learn more about IMT and discover if they might be a candidate by visiting the website centrasight.com. The procedure is covered by Medicare so there is little out-of-pocket expense. It takes about an hour and the patient can go home the same day.

"A vast majority have had a very beneficial experience and the ability to function has increased tremendously," Zaidman said. "They won't go back to driving a car, but they will recognize people and things on TV and in the movies, but probably not the details of that stamp collection."

Vellone said since he had the surgery his quality of life has improved dramatically and he can watch his favorite sports teams on TV once again. He's also been back out in his garden and just finished planting his tomatoes and peppers and a bunch of flowers.

"Thank God for Dr. Zaidman and the man who invented it. It's made a big difference in my life," Vellone said. "I cannot see a downside. I mean, what would I have had to look forward to? It was just going to get worse."

Vellone has a winter home in Florida and he said the last time he was there he would pass by people in the neighborhood without acknowledging them because he couldn't even recognize their faces.

"My wife and I used to sit at the bar and she would give me a nudge when the bikini girls walked by, but I couldn't see anything," he said with a laugh.

Now Vellone can't wait to return to Florida this winter.



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