Gifts from a stranger offer new hope for patients

"For most of our patients, we were able to take something that is broken, fix it and make it work even better. That is the best part of my job."

Samuel Fulcher, M.D.
Chief of the Section of Corneal External Disease, Scott & White Division of Ophthalmology

He calls it the windshield of the eye, the part of the eye that helps us focus and see clearly. Without it, our world would be a continual blur. So what happens when our corneas are damaged beyond repair? Samuel Fulcher, M.D., Chief of the Section of Corneal External Disease in the Scott & White Division of Ophthalmology, knows exactly what to do.

There are many things that can damage the cornea, the transparent cover of the eyeball that covers the iris and the pupil and lets light into the eye. Trauma, infection, scarring and even hereditary problems can cause the cornea to degenerate, causing vision loss in a person.

"If a person has mild corneal scarring, we can usually correct the problem with glasses or contacts," Dr. Fulcher said. "But, in cases of extreme scarring, a transplant is needed."

Dr. Fulcher receives his corneas from the Central Texas Lions Eye Bank in Austin, thanks to those persons who volunteered to be organ donors after their death. This eye bank has very strict regulations when it comes to donor candidates.

"I am very particular about the corneas I will accept," Dr. Fulcher said. "The donor has to be of a certain age with healthy eyes and no prior refractive eye surgery. The cornea has to be retrieved within a certain period of time to ensure its effectiveness. We are very strict and specific about what we will use for our patients."

Once a patient has received a transplant, which is done in an outpatient procedure, Dr. Fulcher continues to regularly see him or her to check for signs of infection and to make sure the cornea is healing. Dr. Fulcher's goal for each patient is clear.

"With this surgery, we want our patients to get the vision back that they had before their eye was damaged, and sometimes we can even improve it," he said. "For most of our patients, we are able to take something that is broken, fix it and make it work even better. That is the best part of my job." *Q*

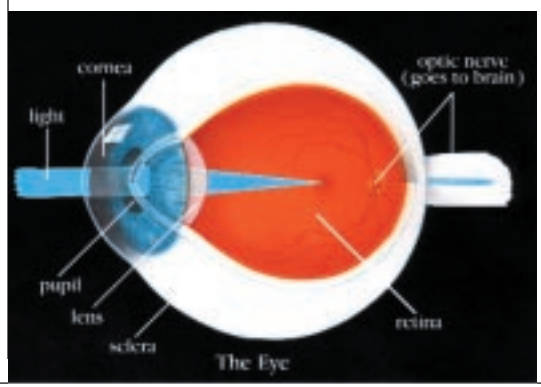

Image shows parts of the human eye.