

# Gift of sight

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Winner of the *Optician Award for Charity Campaign of the Year* was research fundraiser Gift of Sight. **Emma White** visited Southampton General Hospital to meet the energetic Professor Andrew Lotery

**P**rofessor Andrew Lotery's mission to find a cure for age-related macular degeneration (AMD) began during his training to be an ophthalmologist at the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast. After taking time out to do a research degree in genetics, Lotery travelled to the University of Iowa in 1998 – home to 'one of the best centres for studying macular degeneration'. Through molecular genetic research Lotery and his colleagues identified the first gene linked to AMD.

'The gene Fibulin 5 is responsible for 1 to 2 per cent of macular degeneration but when you think that there are around 25 million people with the disease in the world, this means hundreds of thousands of people can benefit,' says Lotery.

In 2001 Lotery was appointed professor of ophthalmology at Southampton University and established a laboratory and research team at the Southampton General Hospital to continue his groundbreaking work. With a grant from the Wellcome Foundation and help from the British Council for the Prevention of Blindness (BCPB), Lotery was able to buy basic equipment and employ research scientists on short-term contracts to study AMD. But before long, the money began to run out.

'The huge challenge is that, on average, just one in 10 grants are funded and it takes six to nine months to get an answer from any individual charity,' he says.

Lotery is keen to convey the difficulty of obtaining funding for medical research. 'Most people think we get funding from the NHS or lottery fund which isn't true. We have one of the lowest rates of government funding in Europe.'

Gift of Sight came about as a direct result of the financial shortage. During his time in the US, Lotery observed how establishing a local charity enabled researchers to obtain funds quickly and move research work forward at a faster pace. With the help of a local TV presenter and press coverage, including a feature in the *Daily Mail*, the charity appeal was launched in July 2004.

'Gift of Sight enables us to act on interesting findings straight away rather than waiting for six months with a 90 per cent chance of rejection for funding.'

Lotery says his ultimate aim would be



Andrew Lotery (left) and his research team

to set up an endowment fund to provide long-term security for the laboratory staff who are all on short-term contracts.

'Supporting our research work makes sound economic sense. One recent study estimated that macular degeneration costs £100m a year to cover things like loss of independence, treating depression, fractures and providing low vision aids. A relatively modest investment at one end will result in better preventative strategies at the other.'

## SUCCESSFUL TRIALS

Lotery works with seven colleagues at his research lab in Southampton General Hospital, including four research scientists and three PhD students. The team are currently carrying out projects on nystagmus, stem cell research and further work into AMD.

Lotery says the team has so far conducted six clinical trials with considerable success. Three drugs can be injected into the eye, binding to the molecule responsible for causing bleeding and scarring in wet AMD patients.

'Previously we could only stop wet AMD sufferers' sight from getting worse but for the first time we are seeing dramatic improvements in about a third of patients. People who were legally blind are now perhaps at driving vision standard again.'

Lotery and his team will continue to study the 'genetic profiling' of the two-thirds whose vision has not improved or

has stabilised without improvement.

Promotion and awareness are key to the success of Gift of Sight and since it was launched the charity has raised almost £200,000 through fundraising activities and donations. Lotery says he was totally amazed when Gift of Sight won the Charity Campaign of the Year category at the *Optician* awards ceremony.

'It was a very competitive field and I really felt that any of the other finalists could have won. I was delighted, amazed and humbled that we were successful.'

Since winning, Lotery says that the award has been mentioned in all charity promotional material and that the University of Southampton also made a feature of it on the main page of the University website.

Never afraid to get involved in fundraising activities, Lotery also raised £15,000 by running the London Marathon in 2005. And colleague and research fellow at the hospital Dr James Self took part in a 12-man trek across the Sahara Desert which raised more than £28,000. In March the team are undertaking a second trek to Machu Picchu in Peru with the aim of raising even more money to continue their crucial research.

Further events planned for next year include a charity golf day, annual 'Eye' ball and national treasure hunt inspired by the charity's patron Richard Adams, author of the novel *Watership Down*.

◆ To offer your support to Gift of Sight contact Victoria Green on 023 8059 9073.