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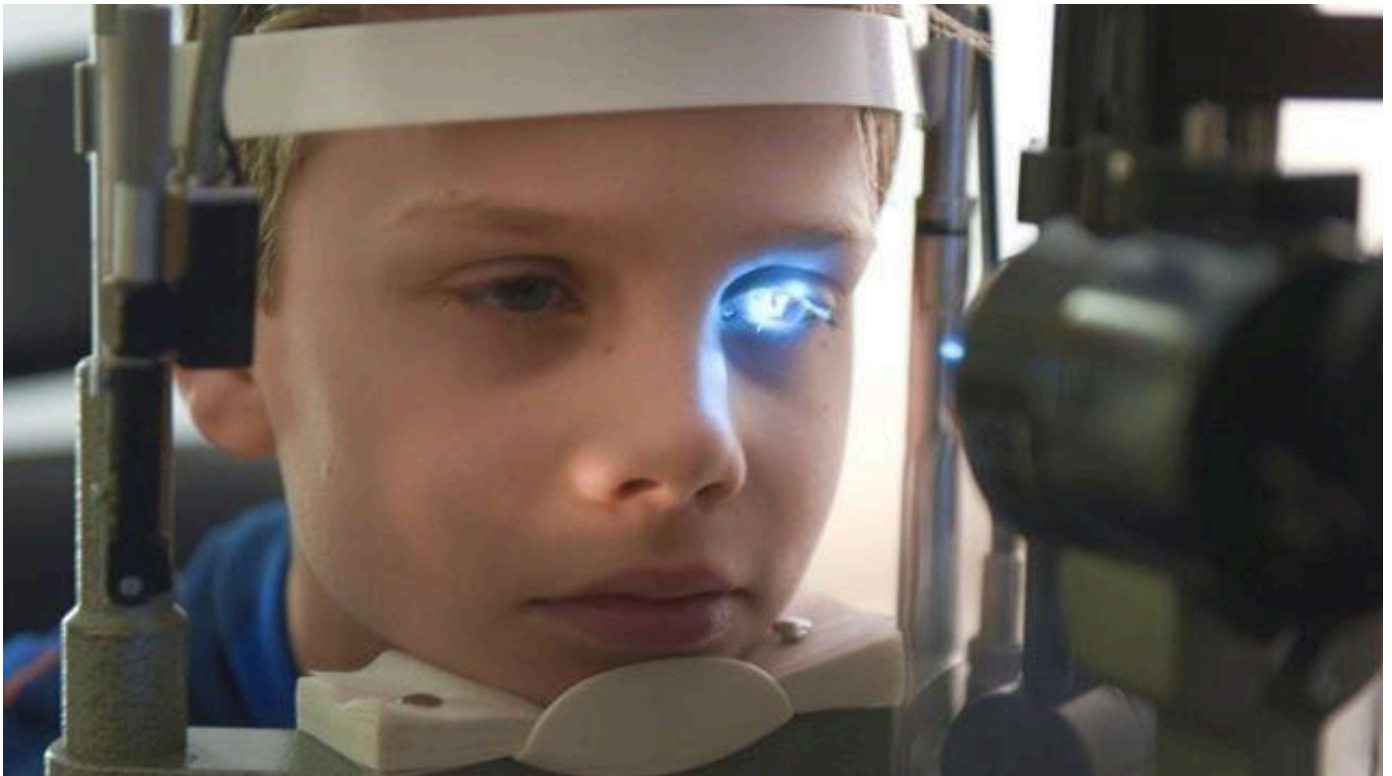
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HAMILTON REGION

Vision loss in Hamilton children going unnoticed: study

More than 80 per cent of Hamilton children needing glasses don't have them because no one knows they have a vision problem.

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Ophthalmologist Dr. Kourosh Sabri uses a split lamp microscope to check the health of Keyvan Mehta-Owens' eye at McMaster Children's Hospital Wednesday. The 10-year-old was diagnosed with a blind eye at seven, but the early diagnosis allowed him to regain his sight through treatment before it was too late.

Scott Gardner / Spectator Staff

By Joanna Frketich Spectator Reporter, The Hamilton Spectator

More than 80 per cent of Hamilton children needing glasses don't have them because no one knows they have a vision problem.

That's the finding of [a study](#) highlighting the need for kids to be screened.

The significant numbers of untreated children have driven Hamilton pediatric ophthalmologist Dr. Kourosh Sabri to research the best and most cost-effective way to bring free eye tests to schools.

“If you don't screen children in time, they can end up with permanent vision loss and, unfortunately, I see that in my clinic every day,” said Sabri.

“Only about 15 to 16 per cent of children under the age of six in Canada actually have had an eye exam and ideally they all should.”

Dr. Shamir Mehta can attest firsthand to the importance of creating a vision screening program in Hamilton that could be copied around the province. The Hamilton cardiologist had no idea his seven-year-old child was blind in one eye and the window to repair it was rapidly closing.

“We were shocked,” he said. “It was just a routine eye exam that we took him for, just for the sake of doing it ... At first, it was disbelief. How could that be the case?”

Keyvan Mehta-Owens never complained about his sight and had no signs of a vision problem. He played sports and did well in school. An eye exam didn't seem a priority and was never recommended by his family doctor.

“Nobody alerted us to the fact that your child's eyes should be checked when they're very young,” said Mehta. “I'm a physician ... I didn't know.”

Sabri said vision issues are commonly missed because the kids appear healthy.

“Children born that way don't know the difference,” said Mehta. “The child will never tell you ‘My vision is off.’ They think everyone sees the way they see.”

The oversight almost cost Keyvan the vision in one eye. A small difference between his eyes at birth resulted in his brain only processing signals from one eye. As his brain grew, only the good eye developed. The fix is easy: patch the good eye so the brain is forced to process signals from the other eye.

“This is a reversible condition and if it's caught, your kid will have normal eyes,” said Mehta. But as kids age and their brains develop, “there is a point of no return.”

It can become irreversible by the ages of roughly eight to 10 so Keyvan was close to the line when it was discovered at age seven. He's now 10 and has nearly perfect vision.

“We're lucky,” said Mehta. “My message would be to get your children's eyes checked at an early age ... I think there needs to be a systematic process in place where all children are screened.”

The EYE-MAC Project has been trying to determine the best way to screen kids for the last three years with funding from the province and the Hamilton Academic Health Sciences Organization.

Its first study of 1,228 Hamilton children between the ages of six and 14 published a year ago in the Canadian Journal of Ophthalmology proved the need. More than 16 per cent of children screened were found to have a vision problem. Only 18 per cent of those needing glasses actually had them.

The study also examined the possibility of making screening more accessible and cost-effective by training undergraduate students to do the initial tests with followup by an ophthalmologist.

“Non-eye-care professionals can be trained to an acceptable degree of accuracy to perform certain vision screening tests on children,” concluded the study.

The ongoing research has now provided screening to 39 Hamilton Catholic elementary schools.

The program has also done screening for the Hamilton Wentworth District School Board.

“Vision is absolutely critical to student achievement and student success,” said Toni Kovach, superintendent of education at the Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board, adding “early detection is absolutely essential.”

Kovach noted the “deep gratitude” the board has for Sabri and his team “because they really are making such a significant impact.”

The EYE-MAC Project is next hoping to look at the difference it makes to take the eye-tests out of classrooms and onto a fully equipped van that would travel from school to school. It is looking to raise \$400,000 for the van and equipment, starting with an information [event Friday](#) from 6:30 p.m. to 8 p.m. at the Zoetic Theatre at 526 Concession St. Donors can also go to mcperg.ca/donate/

“For delivery of eye care to children in this country, there are gaps that can be closed,” said Sabri. “The reality is all children should have regular vision screening but most of them don’t.”



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