

Brush with glaucoma



Photo by Luke Parker

Eighty-two-year-old Esme Towns won't let a serious eye condition stop her painting.

The Green Bay artist has glaucoma in both eyes and has just finished an exhibition at the Art Station in Ponsonby.

Glaucoma causes damage to optic nerves and can lead to vision loss or even blindness.

Mrs Towns experienced symptoms when she was younger but didn't get diagnosed until her 40s.

"I think the first time it affected me was when I posed for a painting at 14 years old," the great-grandmother of 16 says. "I had to look at a spot on the wall but I couldn't do it. My eyes were bloodshot."

The former art teacher later saw patches of colour and started having other problems.

"I was getting a lot of eye headaches and I thought I needed glasses for reading and art work, so I went to an optometrist," she says. Mrs Towns uses drops and other medication to keep her eyes moist.

She advises people to go straight to an optometrist if they're experiencing headaches.

Glaucoma New Zealand is running its annual appeal in July.

Chairwoman professor Helen Danesh-Meyer says the disease is a significant health issue.

An estimated 68,000 New Zealanders over the age of 40 already have it and as many as half don't realise they are affected.

"It slowly steals their vision," Ms Danesh-Meyer says.

"Most people experience no symptoms until it is too late to repair the damage that has been progressively getting worse over a long period of time."

She says it is also important for people to know if glaucoma runs in their family because genetics can increase the risk ten-fold.

Vision loss from glaucoma is irreversible so it needs to be treated before symptoms develop.

"Treatment can include drops, pills, laser surgery, operations or a combination of methods and is aimed at lowering the pressure in the eye," Ms Danesh-Meyer says. "This will not restore lost vision – but it will halt progression."

Go to www.glaucoma.org.nz, email info@glaucoma.org.nz, or call 0800 452 826 for more information.