



Dr. Lawrence Singerman examines Helene Cicero, a macular degeneration patient, recently at Retina Associates in Beachwood.

Eye tuning

Results of macular-degeneration clinical trial done by local practice suggesting cheaper drug just as effective as costly one

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Helene Cicero first became concerned about her vision when she was unable to clearly see the photo of her late husband that she keeps in her bedroom.

"I went to my doctor for a checkup, and he referred me to Dr. (Lawrence) Singerman, who told me I had macular degeneration," she said.

The dry macular degeneration doctors had diagnosed originally had turned into wet macular degeneration — a condition that robs many people older than 65 of their vision.

Age-related macular degeneration is a disease associated with aging that gradually destroys the sharp, central vision needed for seeing objects clearly and for common daily tasks such as reading and driving.

People with it feel no pain, and often it advances so slowly that they notice very little change in their vision.

But the wet type of macular degeneration can advance quickly.

"In wet macular degeneration, abnormal blood vessels form beneath the retina and leak fluid

under the macula," explained Singerman.

He's a principal investigator in an ongoing clinical trial that compares the effectiveness of treatment by two different drugs — both made by the same company.

Both drugs have proven highly effective for causing the regression of the blood vessels that rob people of their central vision. But one costs \$2,000 for the needed monthly injection, while the other costs \$50.

"They enrolled me into the study right away," said Cicero, 74, who has lived in Lyndhurst for many decades and is the mother of Lyndhurst Mayor Joseph Cicero.

Although the full two-year study won't be complete until January, the early results have been so dramatic that a month ago the New England Journal of Medicine proclaimed the less expensive drug, Avastin, to be just as effective as the more expensive drug, Lucentis. That's especially good news for those without insurance or having insurance plans that will cover only the least expensive drug option.

"This is going to save Medicare a lot of money," Singerman said.

Cicero receives one injection a

month, and, like other clinical trial participants, she doesn't know which drug she is receiving.

But Dianne Himmelman, a registered nurse who is part of Singerman's clinical trial team at the Beachwood-based Retinal Associates of Cleveland Inc., saw results almost immediately.

"Both drugs produced an immediate and substantial decrease in swelling in the retina," she said. "Both were virtually identical for visual acuity at all time points when administered."

The first year's trial results are from 22,138 total patient visits at clinics here and at The Ohio State University.

Cicero says she's glad to be taking part in her own health care by participating in the clinical trial.

"At first, when I learned I would be getting a shot in the eye, I wasn't too happy," she said.

"But it's saving my vision, and it's really been a piece of cake. They numb you first, and the girls in his practice held my hand. For a split second you feel a little pressure."

She called Singerman "a fabulous doctor" who explains every procedure thoroughly and takes the



Cicero gets an injection for macular degeneration from Singerman. The eye is prepped and numbed before the patient receives the injection.

time to get to know each of his patients as well as their concerns.

"And the girls who work with him are very kind and caring. They have become my friends," Cicero said.

She continues to work selling real estate, and her vision has returned.

"I can see my husband's face again," she said.

She also can clearly see her 10 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

Although maintaining an office that's certified to conduct clinical trials is no simple matter, Singerman has been principal investigator for more than 75 clinical trials.

"I was privileged to be trained by Dr. Arnall Patz, an ophthalmologist in retinal services at Johns Hopkins (School of Medicine in Baltimore)," he said.

With one of the earliest clinical trails in ophthalmology, Patz discovered that it was the high oxygen doses given to premature infants that was causing their blindness, he said.

Details

Dr. Lawrence Singerman and seven other doctors, all board-certified in ophthalmology, operate Retina Associates of Cleveland Inc. at eight Northeast Ohio offices, including one in Mentor at 9485 Mentor Ave., and one at 3401 Enterprise Parkway in Beachwood.

Info: 800-4-RETINA; www.retina-doctors.com

"It was very controversial to lower the oxygen dose for preemies, but was such a critically important finding. Within two years the incidence of blindness in premature infants plummeted," Singerman said. "Since then I've been a champion of clinical trials."

He believes his team of nurses and clinical coordinators is the best in the country.

"I've developed this team since I was first in practice in 1974 and would match them against any institution in the country," he said.