

Making a noise about the silent thief

By DANIELLE STREET

The “silent thief of sight” won’t be robbing Labour leader David Shearer anytime soon.

While in Auckland last week the Mt Albert MP dropped into the St Lukes branch of OPSM to have his eyes tested as part of Glaucoma Awareness Month.

Around 68,000 New Zealanders over the age of 40 have glaucoma and about half of those are undiagnosed, according to figures from Glaucoma New Zealand.

By the year 2031 it is estimated this number will grow to 76,000.

“Until I got this message, I knew it was around, but I didn’t know just how widespread it was,” Mr Shearer says. “It’s shocking actually.”

Glaucoma is often referred to as the “silent thief” as it has no symptoms, until sight has already been irreversibly damaged.

“Obviously it’s a huge issue for the individual, and it has big knock on affects in terms of our health budget and looking after people who are going blind,” Mr Shearer says.

Early detection is the best way to halt the progression of glaucoma and preserve the patient’s sight.

Glaucoma NZ recommends an eye examination for glaucoma every five years for people over the age of 45, and every three years for people over the age of 60, manager Helen Mawn says.

“Even people that buy reading glasses from the chemist, if you need reading glasses from the chemist you should probably have a



Good eye-dea: Labour leader and Mt Albert MP David Shearer gets a glaucoma check-up from optometrist Anupma Pillay.

Photo: JASON OXENHAM

full eye examination,” she says. “People can wear readers for years unaware they’ve got something else going on.”

In most cases if glaucoma is detected the patient can be prescribed eyedrops for use everyday,

which are 98 per cent effective in saving eyesight.

OPSM optometrist Alice Ku says Glaucoma NZ is doing a good job raising awareness about the disease.

“We are getting more people in

asking to be tested specifically for glaucoma,” she says.

“People are becoming aware that they may not notice symptoms so they are choosing to be tested, which is fantastic.”

Mrs Ku says if someone has a

► KEY MESSAGE

July is Glaucoma Awareness month.

■ The key message revolves around early detection of the disease to prevent blindness. Glaucoma New Zealand recommends an eye examination for glaucoma every five years from the age of 45 and every three years from the age of 60.

However, if you notice changes in your eyesight at any age you should have your eyes examined.

■ Glaucoma is the name given to a group of related diseases where the optic nerve is being damaged. The nerve fibres progressively die taking away the peripheral or side vision first. Therefore visual loss goes undetected until it is quite advanced.

■ Glaucoma is the No 1 cause of preventable blindness in New Zealand and other developed countries.

■ Go to glaucoma.org.nz for more information.

family history of glaucoma they are five to 10 times more likely to develop the disease themselves.

“We are getting good traction around picking up early cases.”

With his eye exam under way, the Leader of the Opposition is quick to recommend others to “just pop in and get it done”.

“In fact, I must get in touch with my mother and ask when was the last time she had a glaucoma test.”