

Keeping blind faith as sight diminishes

I gave Mum a book for her birthday. But she could no longer read.

She hadn't told me she was that bad. She hadn't kept me informed of the rapid and irreversible deterioration of her eyesight, so I had continued to keep sending her books.

For my mother, such an avid reader, to lose her sight was almost incomprehensible to me. How utterly devastating it must be for her. Consequently, she hadn't been able to tell me how bad it was.

We are separated by the Tasman Sea, but I am always in close communication with my parents via a weekly letter and as many phone calls as we can afford. We've always had an understanding that, despite the distance, we would never keep anything from each other, particularly regarding health issues as my parents are both in their 80s.

I had faith in her, blind faith, that she would keep her end of the bargain. And she had, until now. What enormous difficulty she must be having as she comes to terms with her devastating loss, let alone trying to express it to me.

Not being able to cook for my father and for our large family when they visit. Not even being able to pour herself a cup of tea. Not being able to see the detail of her prizewinning garden and not being able to read.

She used to read the papers from front to back every day; she read piles of magazines; she read hundreds of books.

I had sent her a book she couldn't read. She can't even read my letters.

My mother suffers from Age Related Macular Degeneration (ARMD), which is the loss of central vision. The macular is the small, central portion of the retina responsible for fine visual discrimination.

ARMD is the major cause of severe vision loss in the over-50s population in Australia and the leading cause of blindness in the developed world.

The chances of developing the disease increase significantly with age, although it is possible to develop symptoms as early as in your 40s.

There is no cure for ARMD. Although it never results in total loss of sight, it causes difficulties severe enough for the sufferer to be registered as blind or partially sighted and has a profound effect on the sufferer's lifestyle.

At first, usually only one eye is affected. In time, such things as reading fine print and threading a needle become difficult. It is also difficult to recognise faces.

"I don't know who has spoken or even if they have spoken to me," my mother tearfully recounts after visiting the shops. As a person well known in the local community, she is devastated that she may appear rude by not acknowledging someone's greeting.

Sufferers can also experience blurred or distorted vision and it becomes difficult to distinguish between similar

colours. In the early stage of her sight loss, my mother called the TV repair man out three times to try to fix what she thought was a fuzzy picture with fading colour.

As the second eye is affected, even reading large print books may become too difficult.

However, people affected are able to move about safely without bumping into things, using their peripheral vision. Consequently, it can be possible for family or friends not to recognise a person is visually impaired or realise the extent of their sight loss.

My mother no longer lunches with her friends. Not only is she worried that her lipstick is not straight, but she is terrified of spilling her food as she cannot see what is on her plate or if it is on her fork.

Mum has numerous aids from the



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Royal NZ Foundation for the Blind, including a talking watch whose electronic "Cock-a-Doodle-Do" sends my toddler into peals of laughter.

But despite the aids and excellent assistance she receives to maximise her remaining vision, there is no denying she is suffering a devastating loss of freedom, independence, privacy and self esteem.

Research shows that ARMD appears to be hereditary in some families, so I can only place my faith, blind faith, in the ophthalmic profession to come up with a cure before my turn comes.