

Doctor helps diabetics regain sight

■ Luviano wants to help patients in any way possible, even financially.

BEAUMONT

By Sarah Moore

When she learned her vision was deteriorating as a result of her long-untreated diabetes, she was terrified. “I was scared out of my wits!” M. Valdez said. “It was the scariest news I’d ever had.” Without health insurance, Valdez, employed as a caregiver, was ready to sell her house, her car — whatever she had to do to save her failing eyesight. Fortunately, she didn’t have to do that. Knowing her situation, her doctor intervened.

Dr. Damien Luviano, an ophthalmologist for Southeast Texas Medical Associates, asked his boss, Dr. James Holly, to help defray the cost of laser therapy for Valdez, to which Holly agreed. Valdez, a 39-year-old wife and mother of an 11-year-old son, had lost much of the vision in her right eye, and the left eye was starting to go when she finally ended up in Luviano’s office in December. She had only been diagnosed with diabetes a couple of months before her consultation with Luviano, although she obviously had been suffering from the disease for some time. Scans of her eyes showed advanced deterioration — images showed clouded orbs pockmarked with white spots, showing where swollen veins were leaking fluid into her retinas. The technical names for her condition are diabetic retinopathy and macular edema. That diagnosis helped Valdez resolve to change old habits, which would improve her health overall — but wouldn’t save her eyesight. Laser surgery, which



Damien Luviano, 61, performs laser surgery to repair damage to Anthony Cole’s eyes that was caused by diabetes. Diabetes causes blood to build up in the eyeball.

helps shrink damaged blood vessels and stop the leakage, is his best weapon in the battle against vision loss associated with diabetes, according to Luviano. With lasers, unfortunately some loss of peripheral, color and night vision is to be expected, but the treatment is effective at slowing vision loss by about half, he said. The downside is that the treatment is expensive, which can cause patients to delay getting or to interrupt treatment. Anthony Cole was one of those. Cole, who has health insurance through his job as a custodian for Beaumont Independent School District, began the treatments, but stopped when he accrued a balance due of \$40 he couldn’t pay. He had begun slipping behind financially when co-payments for doctor visits and prescriptions he needs for treatment of his diabetes started to pile up. “I told him the same thing I tell all my patients,” Luviano said. “I’ll help you no matter what.” The SETMA foundation agreed to help. “I’m very appreciative of

that and of (Luviano) too,” Cole said. “Not only is he in love with his work, he has compassion too. That’s what impressed me about him.” Denial is another reason patients fail to get treatment. According to the National Eye Institute, diabetic retinopathy, the most common diabetic eye disease, is a leading cause of blindness in American adults. Because in its early stages, the eyesight-threatening condition has no symptoms, patients might not feel a sense of urgency until the damage is advanced. “It’s not easy to convince a patient of damage when they have no symptoms,” Luviano said. Two of Luviano’s patients admitted that in the earlier stages of their diabetes, they didn’t really take the threat seriously. For Lisa Duhan of Bridge City, a heart attack at age 54 followed by an exam indicating diabetes related eye damage have both served as a wake-up call. She was in denial regarding complications when first diagnosed with diabetes in the mid-1990s — but

not any more. “I just know it’s scary because I don’t want to go blind — I don’t,” she said. Mauriceville resident Gene Alston, 62, acted the same way. “I knew what I was supposed to do, but I didn’t do it,” he said. Now he’s in the midst of a round of laser treatments. “If I’d taken care of myself better, I wouldn’t be doing this,” he said of the somewhat painful treatments. But like the other patients, Alston is now willing to do what it takes to preserve his eyesight. Some of the most dramatic results Luviano has seen were in Valdez’s case, with the lasers actually helping her regain some lost sight. “Oh gosh, it’s like a miracle,” Valdez said. “A very dark world got brighter.” “It’s like the best gift I’ve ever been given in my entire life — it’s just the best gift!” SCMoore@beaumontenterprise.com Twitter.com/daily_tiger

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