

OPINION // COMMENTARY

Commentary: Seeing the world gave me a clearer view of San Antonio's eye care needs

By Dr. James Lehmann, *For the Express-News*

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A woman picks out a pair of glasses after receiving an eye exam. An estimated 75,000 San Antonians live with vision disability and access to care remains a huge challenge.

Brett Coomer/Staff photographer

No person should live with vision impairment that could be avoided or treated, and every person with chronic vision impairment should have access to health services that minimize the impact of vision loss on their overall health and quality of life.

While it is obvious that restoring a person's vision will improve their life, many may not realize there is a ripple effect on the family, community and economy. The economic and social costs of vision impairment create obstacles for children to succeed in school, unemployment for adults, higher mortality rates, and the need for more care as a person with visual impairment ages.

I started my career as an ophthalmologist working for Orbis, a nonprofit that delivers sight-saving programs around the world. I traveled on its Flying Eye Hospital, the world's only fully accredited ophthalmic teaching hospital on an aircraft.

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I did not have to travel far, however, to find an unmet need for life-changing eye care. The problem exists in our own community, as an estimated 75,000 San Antonians live with vision disability.

So, what do I recommend?

First, public awareness is key. While the economic and social costs of preventable blindness and vision loss to patients, the health care system and society are considerable, public awareness of this is not. Letting people go untreated hurts us all.

Second, take care of your health. In Bexar County, 16% of the population has diabetes (the U.S. average is 10%). Having diabetes increases the risk for diabetic retinopathy, an eye disease that can lead to vision problems and blindness. Getting regular eye exams is important, even if you are not experiencing any vision problems, as signs of diabetes and other health issues often can be detected early on through a simple exam.

Third, expand access to appropriate clinical care. Texas continues to lead the nation with both the highest number and highest percentage of residents without health insurance, which keeps many from seeking health care services and preventive care, including eye care.

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We know that by catching problems early, we can prevent blindness and vision loss, so it is critical patients see their optometrist or ophthalmologist for yearly vision exams. Those without insurance can access I Care Clinic, offered through the nonprofit I CARE San Antonio and the University Health System.

It is thrilling that procedures I perform, such as cataract surgery, can have such a strong impact on improving lives. In addition to working in my private practice, in partnership with I CARE San Antonio, my business partner, Dr. Kenneth Maverick, and I perform volunteer cataract operations every month at our surgery center.

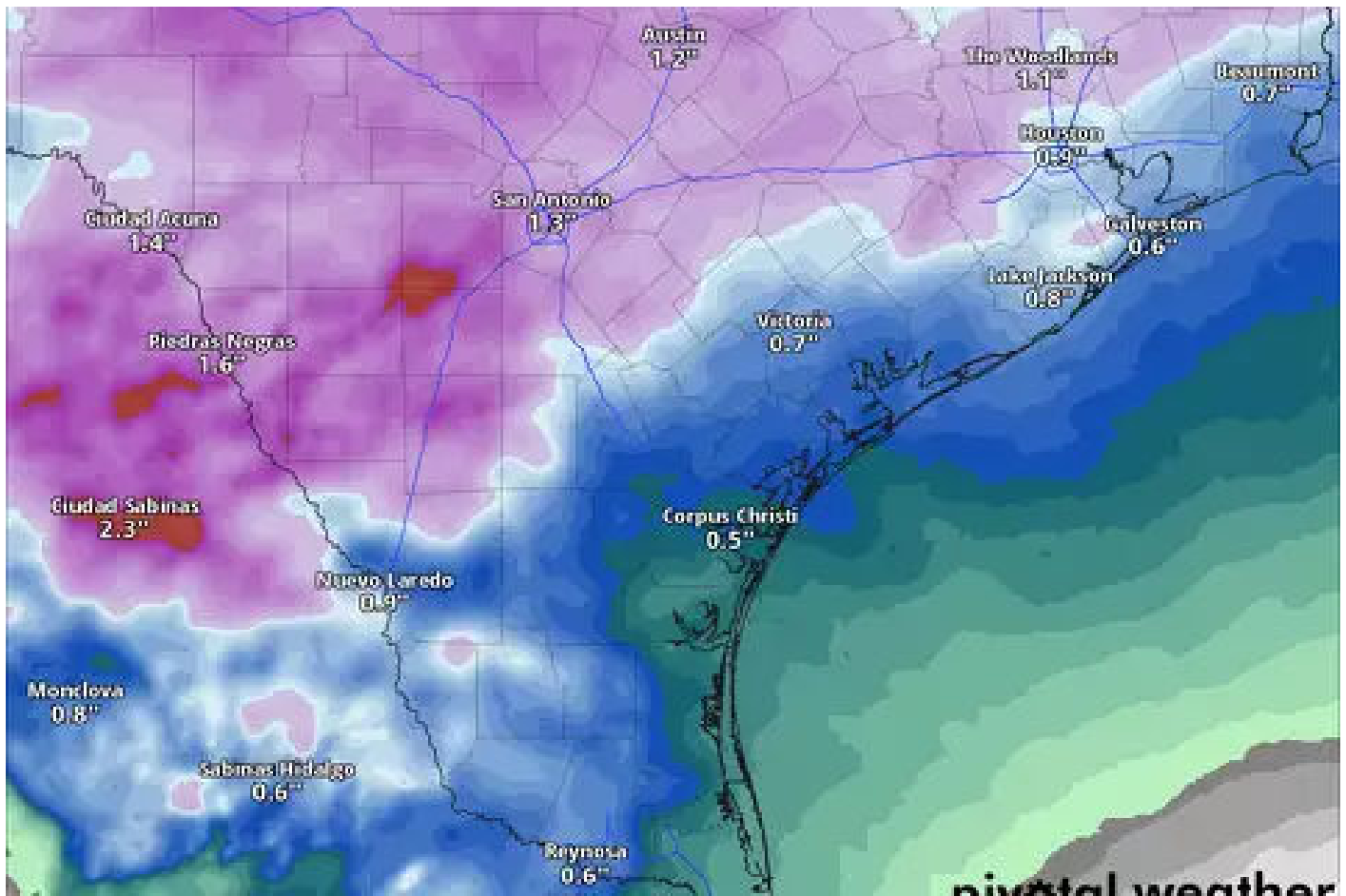
Restoring sight makes a huge difference in people's lives. The rewards of eye surgery are profound, and global efforts can have a ripple effect on families, communities and the world.

Dr. James Lehmann is a surgeon and owner of Focal Point Vision Correction.

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Dr. James Lehmann

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