

I'm so grateful I was given the chance to get my sight back and read to my grandson again

WALTER Jennings can read to his grandson again.

And the 66-year-old, from Ashbourne, is immensely grateful to the people who donated their corneas to make it possible.



Walter Jennings has got his sight back

"It's a very brave thing to agree to give your eyes away after your death," said Walter, fighting back tears.

"I can't thank the people enough for what they have done for me. I've been given a second chance at life and I will be eternally grateful. This transplant means the world to me."

The donors will remain anonymous and Walter has no way of finding out about the people who added their name to the Organ Donor Register.

But before their deaths, they must have agreed for their corneas to be transplanted.

"It's wonderful," said Walter of Lambourne Avenue. "I don't know if it they were men or women and I have no idea how old they were.

"But I am so grateful. Their generosity is very much appreciated."

Walter begins to cry as he talks about what he has been through. It has been an emotional journey and one which still upsets him.

But today, he is very happy.

"I can see – that's why," he said. "When my eyes started to let me down it felt like everything was shutting down. Now I feel great."

Walter had his first cornea transplant at the Royal Derby Hospital in December 2010. When his sight was fully restored in one eye, he asked his surgeon, Mr Maghizh Anandan, if he could have the other one done.

In December, Walter went through the same operation to rectify the problem in his right eye.

Mr Anandan replaced the innermost layers of Walter's cornea and also removed his cataracts. This type of operation is called a partial thickness corneal transplant.

The corneas were retrieved from the Corneal Transplant Service, which runs its eye bank in Bristol.

It is the largest eye bank in Europe and supplies more than 1,500 corneas every year to hospitals across the UK.

Corneas can be stored for up to a month at the Bristol base while a suitable match is found.

Walter waited six months for his first operation.

"I didn't mind waiting," he said. "At the time I had no idea what the transplant was going to do for me.

"Obviously, I hoped it would make a difference to my sight but I was warned it might not be a success.

"I suppose I was patient and waited for my appointment."

Walter, who worked at a plastics company, took early retirement when his eyesight started to fail.

It was his optician who suggested he make an appointment to see his doctor.

"I went for an eye test and I was told that no pair of glasses could help to improve my eyesight," said Walter.

"It was a bit of a shock. I went to see my GP and he referred me to the eye clinic at the Royal Derby. I was hoping that the doctors might be able to do something to help my sight. I'd really started to struggle to read and I found it very frustrating."

Walter was diagnosed with a condition called Fuch's endothelial dystrophy, a slowly progressing corneal disease that usually affects both eyes.

People are born with it but it rarely affects vision until they reach their 50s and 60s.

"I had no idea," said Walter. "It came as a bit of a shock. The doctor said that my vision problems were as a result of this condition."

"It affects the front surface of the eye. Deposits form in the cornea and contribute to the loss of cells."

"Over time, people lose the ability to see and that's what was happening to me."

Walter said his sight had been fully restored since his second operation in December. He still wears glasses to read but there has been a radical improvement.

After both operations, Walter was told to lie flat on his back while his eye settled down after the surgery.

Two tiny stitches are put in to keep everything in place but are taken out soon afterwards.

"After the operation, my eye was covered in a big plaster," said Walter. "For a while, I had no idea how effective the surgery had been."

"I was also warned that it could take weeks before everything settled down and my sight started to improve."

"But I was lucky. Almost overnight, I could tell that the op had been a success. When I went back to the hospital the following day, the doctors were pleased with me."

"I felt so relieved. I could see again," he said. "It was the most wonderful thing in the world. I was struggling with my sight and now I'm not."

"I couldn't read newspapers and when my post came through the door, I had to get my wife to read it."

"I could just about see to sign my name on important documents."

"But what used to break my heart the most is when I stopped being able to read to my little grandson, Leo. He'd bring me a book and I'd have to tell him to go to his grandma because I couldn't do it.

"I always felt so sorry about that. I missed out on lots of cuddles with him as I couldn't read the words on the page.

"That's all changed now. I can see everything really clearly. I can read to him and he sits with me again.

"I want to build on our relationship now and enjoy being a grandad again."

Walter was keen for his surgeon to repeat the process on his other eye. His second operation took place exactly a year after his first.

"I've got two good eyes now," he said. "And it's unbelievable. I feel so well and I know that my life is better."

Walter's wife, 66-year-old Andrea, said she had seen huge changes in her husband. She said he was much happier and enjoying being with his grandson.

"I think he felt a bit low when his eyesight started to dip," she said. "It's a very frightening prospect to think that you're losing your vision.

"He had to leave work and then all this started. I think it bothered him because he'd just retired.

"He wanted to be able to enjoy his time without the constant worry that he was losing his sight.

"When he was offered the operation, he was very keen to have it. We both thought it would give us a new lease of life."

Since Walter's operation Andrea says the couple have thought more about the Organ Donor Register.

They are now considering adding their details to the life-saving and life-changing national database.

"It certainly makes you think," said Andrea. "We'll never get to find out who saved Walter's sight but it was the most generous gift.

"What they did for him has been amazing. They've given him his life back and that means everything to me.

"He's happy again and that's wonderful.

"Walter and I have talked about adding our details to the Organ Donor Register. We think it's a good idea.

"When our time is up, it would be lovely to think that we could help someone else.

"That's what happened to us and we will always be very grateful. Walter feels very fortunate."

Contact Mr Anandan via his private secretary, Sue Da Silva on Tel. 07900210191