

I am 56 years old and have been driving for nearly 40 years, since I first got my driver's licence in my late teens.

My vision had always been fine until my early 40s when I started to have trouble getting an eyeglass prescription that would give me normal vision. Eventually I was diagnosed with a condition called Macular Telangiectasia (Mactel) which is a slow, progressive condition affecting the central vision of the macula. At present there is no treatment for this condition. Because it often starts out quite mild, many are unaware that they have a problem until it progresses further.

In my case the condition did not cause too many problems at first. I did notice some deterioration in my ability to read things at a distance but it was more annoying than a significant problem.

I held a full unrestricted licence until 2019 when I had to get my licence renewed and this was the first time I was unable to pass the eye test at the registry. The RMS in NSW requires a minimum acuity of 6/12 and I was just short of that. With a report from my ophthalmologist I was able to renew my licence but with a restriction on driving within a set distance from my home in Sydney.

I came across Bioptics when researching driving aids and found Dr. Sharon Oberstein at UNSW who is one of the only optometrists with experience in bioptics in Australia. After several rounds of exams and consultations with her and her team I was fitted with a pair of bioptics and now use them whenever I am driving.

I have found them extremely helpful. With my condition I have no issue with my visual fields, depth perception or other general vision but I do have trouble reading signs in the distance or hazards farther away. With the bioptic it removes a lot of these issues. I only use it to glance at signs or situations in the distance when needed. It's much like looking in a rear view mirror -- a quick glance is usually all that's needed to see what is happening. The vast majority of the time they are not needed. It is important to use them properly as they do provide a narrow, magnified view, which reduces one's peripheral vision when looking through it. But for a quick glance that is not a problem.

At present NSW will usually allow drivers with vision below 6/12 but better than 6/24 to drive with some conditions, either a range from home and/or a night driving restriction. But it doesn't recognise the bioptic in its assessment of the driver's capabilities. This has been quite frustrating for me as both my ophthalmologist and optometrist have been supportive of lesser restrictions on my driving than the RMS is allowing. The bioptic has clearly made a difference to my driving but it is currently of no value as far as the RMS is concerned.

My understanding is that many overseas jurisdictions have specific provisions which support bioptic use. Bioptics are recognised as a valuable driving aid which allows drivers with visual impairments to continue driving safely. My experience certainly supports this and I hope that the RMS and other road authorities in Australia are prepared to consider the evidence from overseas and the personal experience of drivers like me and accord bioptics formal recognition.