

The Hams Who Save Sight

A cornea is needed to prevent a child's blindness, but where can one be found? These amateur radio operators can be relied on for the answer

By CHARLES and BONNIE REMSBERG



Joe Kaniuk, one of the Eyeball Network's 25 volunteers, checks with local eye bank for emergencies.

LAST MARCH, a two-year-old girl in Oklahoma City lived for hours in a terrible shadow.

Her eye had accidentally brushed against the hot tip of her father's cigarette. Unless surgeons could remove the damaged tissue and transplant a fresh cornea within the next few hours, the stricken youngster would lose vision in her injured eye.

The eye bank nearest her home had no cornea available. No interoffice communication exists among the 60-some eye banks scattered across the U. S. Time could easily run out before the costly chore of tracking down an eye in another city could be completed by telephone.

Thanks to a remarkable group of amateur radio operators, however, a cornea was found within hours, and the child's sight was saved.

The "hams," calling themselves the "Eyeball Network," form the first and most efficient link between U. S. eye banks. Their dramatic dedication could someday save you or your children from blindness in the wake of sudden tragedy.

The network's 25 volunteer members in 16 cities are notified at any hour by their local eye banks of emergency needs or of surplus corneas. Then, twice daily, at 7 a.m. and 8 p.m. (CDT), the hams go on the air at 3970 and 3963 kilocycles to exchange information.

When the Oklahoma child was injured, Travis Harris, that city's network representative, broadcast the girl's plight during the morning roll call. No network members knew of extra corneas at that time, but each reported the emergency to the nearest bank.

Two hours later, an elderly Chicago eye donor died. His eyes were surgically removed for use by the eye bank of the Illinois Society for the Prevention of Blindness. Because there were no known emergencies in Illinois, the bank turned to the case from Oklahoma, reported that morn-

ing by one of the Chicago area hams, Joe Kaniuk of suburban Morton Grove.

Now because of the hams' relay, one of the donor's eyes was specially packaged and flown to Oklahoma City to aid the little girl.

Since the network was organized in December, 1962, some 35 similar emergencies have been met. In addition, the hams have helped secure 25 "surplus" corneas for use in planned operations.

"If it hadn't been for the 'Eyeball Network,'" says Corinne Cloppas of the Illinois Society for the Prevention of Blindness, "more than one person would have been condemned to blindness."

Eye injuries must be corrected swiftly, or irreparable complications will develop. Also a donor's eyes must be utilized within 36 to 48 hours of his death if corneal transplants are to be effective. Time and again, the hams' ability to establish simultaneous contact with a variety of cities has proved the best means of bringing together persons threatened with blindness and the eyes of persons who wished them to be useful after death.

RECENTLY WE LISTENED to a network roll call over Joe Kaniuk's ham equipment and heard factory owner Ted Hunter of Iowa City tell how he and a fellow ham, Dr. Alson Braley, had conceived the idea.

"Doc Braley is the head of the ophthalmology department at the University of Iowa," Hunter explained. "Some years ago, a patient already blind in one eye lost sight in his second eye because no cornea was available for a transplant. It was a terrible thing, and it haunted both of us.

"We knew some inexpensive system of communications was needed between eye banks. One bank might need an eye desperately while another would have one going to waste and not know of the other's need. What was fast and free?—well, ham radio was the answer."

Hunter and Braley began discussing the net-

work with hams in areas where banks were located. Kaniuk heard their repeated calls about a "new way to help people see" as he was listening to his set in bed one night. Others listened, too, and soon the network began taking shape.

One man in Iowa needed a fast transplant because his cornea had ruptured. The emergency call went out at 7 a.m. By 10, a cornea was on its way to his doctor.

In Kansas, a girl's cornea was diseased and threatening to burst. As she was rushed to a hospital, the net's amazingly swift relay located a donated eye so that surgeons could operate before her sight blacked out.

IF YOU WANT to get a spine-tingling sensation, just be a network ham meeting one of these people you've helped," Ted Hunter told us. "It's hard to describe how it feels when someone looks at you and says, 'You have saved my sight.'"

For some of the hams, the thanks of a patient carries special impact. Travis Harris, for example, is himself totally blind.

"I was 10 years old when my eyes were damaged in a stove explosion at school," he told us over the air. "I could still see light for 25 years. Then glaucoma developed and I became blind.

"When I was first hurt, a corneal transplant might have saved my sight. Unfortunately, the technique hadn't been devised yet. But now that it has, one of the biggest satisfactions I get out of life is helping others see again."

That sums up the attitude of all the hams on the "Eyeball Network." Some West Coast hams must rise before 5 a.m. to make roll call; others adjust social and business schedules to accommodate the regular broadcasts. Yet in talking to many of them we didn't hear these inconveniences mentioned once.

All referred only to their "good fortune" in being able to use a hobby to perform a needed public service.