

Tulane professor wins fight for glaucoma ‘refill bill’

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Dr. Ramesh Ayyala, a Tulane professor of ophthalmology, successfully led a campaign to ensure that insurance companies would sufficiently cover glaucoma medication. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

A bill authored by Dr. Ramesh Ayyala, a professor of ophthalmology at Tulane University, was recently enacted by the Louisiana State Legislature.

The “Refill Bill,” as Ayyala calls it, ensures that glaucoma patients with prescribed eye drops are guaranteed a sufficient amount of medication with each monthly prescription.

“The rate at which the eyedrop falls out of the eye is one in three, on average. So one in three times one of those drops will end up on the cheek,” said Ayyala. “This means if I prescribe to you a drop to be used once a day for 30 days, the insurance company gives you exactly 30 drops in a bottle. You miss about seven, so you run out on day 23. For a week, there’s no medication left in the bottle.”

Before the Refill Bill, insurance companies did not pay for the extra drops many patients needed after day 23. So Ayyala, as president of Louisiana’s Ophthalmology Association, worked with the American Academy of Ophthalmology to introduce the Refill Bill to the Louisiana State Legislature in early 2016. The new legislation requires insurance companies operating in the state to cover the additional week of eyedrops at no extra charge.

The bill was passed unopposed and went into effect on Jan. 1, 2017.

“I think this is a big deal for the patients,” said Ayyala. “Patient advocacy is something close to my heart and something I will continue to work on.”

Now, Ayyala is working with his former students, who are graduates from the Tulane Department of Ophthalmology, to introduce similar legislation in other states.

“We have to go state by state on this,” said Ayyala. “So wherever I can help, I will.”

Samah Ahmed is a junior majoring in public health at Tulane University.

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— Dr. Ramesh Ayyala, professor of ophthalmology at Tulane University