

## IN HINDSIGHT, BETTER LIFESTYLE CHOICES SEEM CLEAR

BY TONISHA MELVIN

In the Bible, the book of Matthew states, “The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness.”

Such ancient advice seems to acknowledge that visual problems like age-related macular degeneration, or AMD, can often go hand in hand with other challenges.

AMD can be a difficult, life-altering problem. The condition is painless but can distort or block how one normally views images. The development of the condition can be accelerated by lifestyle choices such as smoking cigarettes.

I once read about a patient in his late seventies who came in for a follow-up medical visit. He was a jovial but widowed male who had enjoyed a long career as a notable, prolific artist of abstract paintings. The painter told his health-care provider on the initial visit that he had a talent for bringing his thoughts to life in vivid

color. The patient said that for years, his mind had been opened through his eyes. The artist said that if he could not see, he would not be able to bring his thoughts to life through art. The painter told his health-care provider during his initial visit that he had been having vision problems and could barely see to do normal things around his home, let alone paint well.

The patient mentioned a history of tobacco use and alcoholism but had not been to a doctor regularly for years because one of the questions he would always be asked was, “Are you ready to quit smoking and drinking?” He wasn’t ready, so he avoided regular medical care. The artist also recalled starting to smoke at age 11 because it looked cool, eventually smoking up to four packs a day until he quit late in life. He quit only because his spouse of forty years had passed away of breast cancer, and she had begged him to take care of himself.

On his follow-up visit, the patient learned he had end-stage renal disease, liver failure, Type II diabetes, lung cancer, and macular degeneration.

After his diagnosis, the artist said he felt dark inside with regret for the years of damage he had done to his body. The painter told his provider that in hindsight, if he knew then what he knows now, he would have kept his body healthy and free of things that would keep him from being able to continue shining a light through his eyes into the world.



**TONISHA MELVIN, DNP, CRRN, NP-C** (Mercer University) is a nurse practitioner at the Washington, DC, VA Medical Center, where she serves as a mental health/primary care provider, program director, and assistant clinical professor for adult gerontology NP graduates. She was named one of sixty-eight African American Leaders in Healthcare by *Becker's Hospital Review* and is a contributing author of *The Charge Nurse Leader Program Builder: A Competency-Based Approach for Developing Frontline Leaders*, a comprehensive curriculum and road map for developing nurse leaders and ensuring charge nurses are trained, mentored, and supported in their roles.