

Exposure for the battler with a cause

2GB RADIO'S Mike Carlton called it "a good story: A lone battler fighting big government — a one man crusade."

To the media Rolf Kaiser's story is that of a 49-year-old invalid pensioner who has sunk his life savings, risked his house, car, and taken out an extra loan to promote awareness of a disease — glaucoma. He said he has spent \$50,000 of his own money in the cause.

He claims he was driven to it by an apathetic profession which was trying to ignore or silence him, and has even suggested a conspiracy.

Ironically his frailty is his greatest strength. It enables him to attract attention and Mr Kaiser has ceaseless energy in espousing his cause. It is beginning to gain him exposure on television (SBS), radio (2GB) and print (*The Australian*, *The Border Mail*).

Authorities in State and Federal health departments and various professional associations have now heard of Mr Kaiser, but have had mixed reactions to a private individual from outside the profession who is making strong allegations.

In March 1986 Rolf Kaiser, a resident of Resolution Street in Albury, was diagnosed as having glaucoma. He had never heard of the disease.

He was subjected to laser treatment, which is successful in 90% of cases. Mr Kaiser's case was one of the other 10 per cent.

He started asking questions about glaucoma. "My problem in life is I always ask questions. I found out, for instance, that my three children have a one in five chance of getting it."

He also found out that estimates of Australians who have had their sight impaired or destroyed by the disease range from 70,000 to 200,000.

Believing that public awareness of a disease affecting so many Australians was too low, Mr Kaiser decided to do something about it.

"I thought I had a civic and moral duty and obligation to rectify the situation, which I see as absolutely intolerable."

Kaiser claims he approached the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind (RVIB) and the Australian Optometry Association (AOA) for information early in his search but was ignored. "The RVIB didn't even answer my letters. I think they are very callous," he said. He had more positive things to say about the AOA, though it took him a while to gain support.

In early 1987 Mr Kaiser applied to the NSW Health Department for funding to reprint a pamphlet on glaucoma published by the NSW Health Commission. The cost for reprinting 200,000 copies was between \$2000 and \$4000. His request was refused.

Mr Kaiser has since used that incident as an example of how the authorities have been apathetic and how they have attempted to silence him.

AOA executive director Joseph Chackman said the Victorian branch of the AOA had been printing brochures for distribution in optometrists' offices for years. Kaiser claimed that early in his campaign he had been unable to obtain information about the brochures.

John Doggett-Williams reports



Mr Rolf Kaiser and his glaucoma booklet.

Mr Kaiser compiled and printed at his own expense a booklet on glaucoma, titled "To See or Not to See". He then embarked on a 15-month journey around Australia distributing copies of the booklet and trying to stir communities into action to promote glaucoma awareness and to obtain government funding to conduct the campaign.

The economic argument is most often and loudest used against Mr Kaiser when he approaches governments. Glaucoma is often compared to AIDS as a funding priority and he is often told the disease must be seen in a context of community priorities.

He is also advocating compulsory glaucoma testing by optometrists and ophthalmologists when performing eye tests.

Mr Chackman said the organisation of the Australian consultation fee for eye tests is the same as the British scheme, which Mr Kaiser holds up as the model that Australia should adopt.

"In Britain glaucoma testing is not compulsory as far as I know," Mr Chackman said. "The situation is the same as it is here. It's done when it's needed."

There's no doubt that Kaiser sees himself as a crusader and has an "us and them" approach, even claiming that there is a conspiracy against him. But armed with some strong statistics and quotes he can make an impressive case for more extensive awareness programs.

There are no comprehensive statistics on glaucoma in Australia and judging from the lack of response from the Federal Health Minister's office to a request for statistics it appears unlikely there will be in the foreseeable future.

The most recent available statistics in Victoria show that from 1983 to 1985 2376 people were treated as in-patients in Victorian hospitals and 96% of those were over the age of 35. As Mr Kaiser points out, that is 16 people per week in Victoria alone.

The Victorian Health Minister, David White, told Mr Kaiser in a letter in September 1987. "At the present time there appears to be little public education about the condition."

Eyecare Australia asked Mr White's office last month whether more recent statistics had become available and whether any specific budget allocation had been made to glaucoma awareness.

The reply came that outside of the Glaucoma unit at the Royal Victorian Eye & Ear (RVE&E) hospital that treatment and promotion of awareness was up to the profession.

The Better Vision Institute in NSW claims 44% of the Australian workforce would fail a simple eye test.

More than 60% of the Australian population wears glasses, of whom 80-85% go to optometrists for their prescriptions.

Professor Frank Billson, Professor of Clinical Ophthalmology at Sydney University and director of the Lions Save Sight and Eye Health Institute in Sydney quoted a recent Massachusetts survey which studied glaucoma over a 10 year period. The survey found that one-third of victims had never had an eye examination.

"By and large they are on the fringe of society — in education and/or understanding," Professor Billson said.

For similar reasons the Professor claimed in his 1986/87 directors' report that half of the cases of new blindness in Australia could be prevented through adequate awareness programs.

Part of the problem with a country like Australia is a lack of services in the periphery, in rural areas," he said.

Mr Kaiser is now receiving financial support from the AOA, which he hopes will give his cause more credibility and help give more publicity to an area that can use it. □