

## SA researchers snare blindness gene

Date: 01 Jul 2001

Cape Town | Saturday

RESEARCHERS in South Africa and Britain have isolated the gene that causes retinitis pigmentosa, a leading cause of inherited blindness affecting one million people worldwide, a report said on Friday.

Two scientists from the University of Cape Town and one from Britain have identified the culprit gene as RP13, which carries a protein that plays a vital role in the production of other proteins, the Cape Argus newspaper reported.

Raj Ramesar, who lectures in human genetics at Cape Town, said the defective gene impairs the person's eyesight by causing a fragmentation of the retina, which can lead to tunnel vision and then to total blindness.

The condition is particularly prevalent in South Africa.

Ramesar said it would take time before the discovery of the gene led to new ways of treating or preventing retinitis pigmentosa.

"Right now, if we predict with this newly available genetic information that someone will eventually develop the disorder, there is nothing we can do other than suggest that they take special care to protect their eyes."

He said the discovery came after 10 years of research that included studies on families in South Africa, Britain, Australia and the Netherlands who suffered from retinitis pigmentosa. - AFP