S’pore docs pioneered method to treat blindness

SOME 45 patients here have had the damaged surfaces of their eye repaired using “master cells” from their healthy other eye to grow more specialised eye tissue.

Master cells, known as stem cells, are taken from small areas in a patient’s healthy eye to grow more specialised tissue such as the cornea – the transparent front part of the eye which covers the pupil – and the surrounding white area.

Damage to this eye surface is the second leading cause of blindness in the world, after cataracts.

This method is an improvement on traditional methods, which transplanted tissue from donors or tissue grown from animal cells.

The new method, pioneered in Singapore in 1999, means better compatibility with patients’ tissues so that they will not have to take drugs to prevent their bodies from rejecting the foreign tissue, said the developer of the procedure, eye specialist Associate Professor Leonard Ang.

But the research is still starting and it will be years before it can replace transplantation.

Prof Ang, from the National University of Singapore’s Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine and the Singapore National Eye Centre, said there are now just a few centres in the world which offer this treatment.

He will be talking more about his procedure at an international science conference here next month.