



Wake-up call for busy diabetic teen

By **KATE HAGAN**
 HEALTH REPORTER

WHEN Rebecca O'Brien was 17, she didn't pay too much attention to managing her diabetes.

"I'd just moved out of home, started working full-time and was discovering nightclubs, partying and boys," she said.

"Having a check-up was at the bottom of my priority list. I felt great, I was having the time of my life, and I saw no need to put a downer on all that by going to see the doctor."

Ms O'Brien had quite a scare about five years later when she went to see an optometrist for some "groovy new purple contact lenses" — but was instead told to urgently see a specialist.

She was diagnosed with the diabetes-related eye disease retinopathy and told that she was just weeks away from losing her sight completely.

Fortunately, laser treatment

helped to shrink abnormal blood vessels in her eyes so that she retained her sight. But Ms O'Brien's vision is not what it should be, especially at night. And she is not alone in having neglected her diabetes care during her young adult years.

Diabetes Australia research shows that between 30-40 per cent of young people with type 1 diabetes do not receive specialist care as they move from the paediatric to adult systems.

A new program launched yesterday is aimed at reversing that trend for the 10,000 Australians aged 15-25 years with the disease.

Diabetes Australia acting chief executive Professor Greg Johnson said the idea was to "remind young people and their parents to think about diabetes care, and provide parents with

information on how to foster independence".

As part of the project the organisation will send cards to young people on their birthdays with a link to its youth website www.myd.net.au, along with letters to parents suggesting how they can help.

Professor Susan Sawyer, director of the Centre for Adolescent Health at the Royal Children's Hospital, said young people with chronic illnesses such as diabetes were at greater risk of mental illnesses such as depression than their peers, and needed encouragement to look after their health.

The message has already reached Freya Wickenden, 12, who said she had her diabetes under good control.



Health matters: Freya Wickenden and Rebecca O'Brien have learnt to take care of their diabetes as part of their busy lives.

PICTURE: ANGELA WILIE