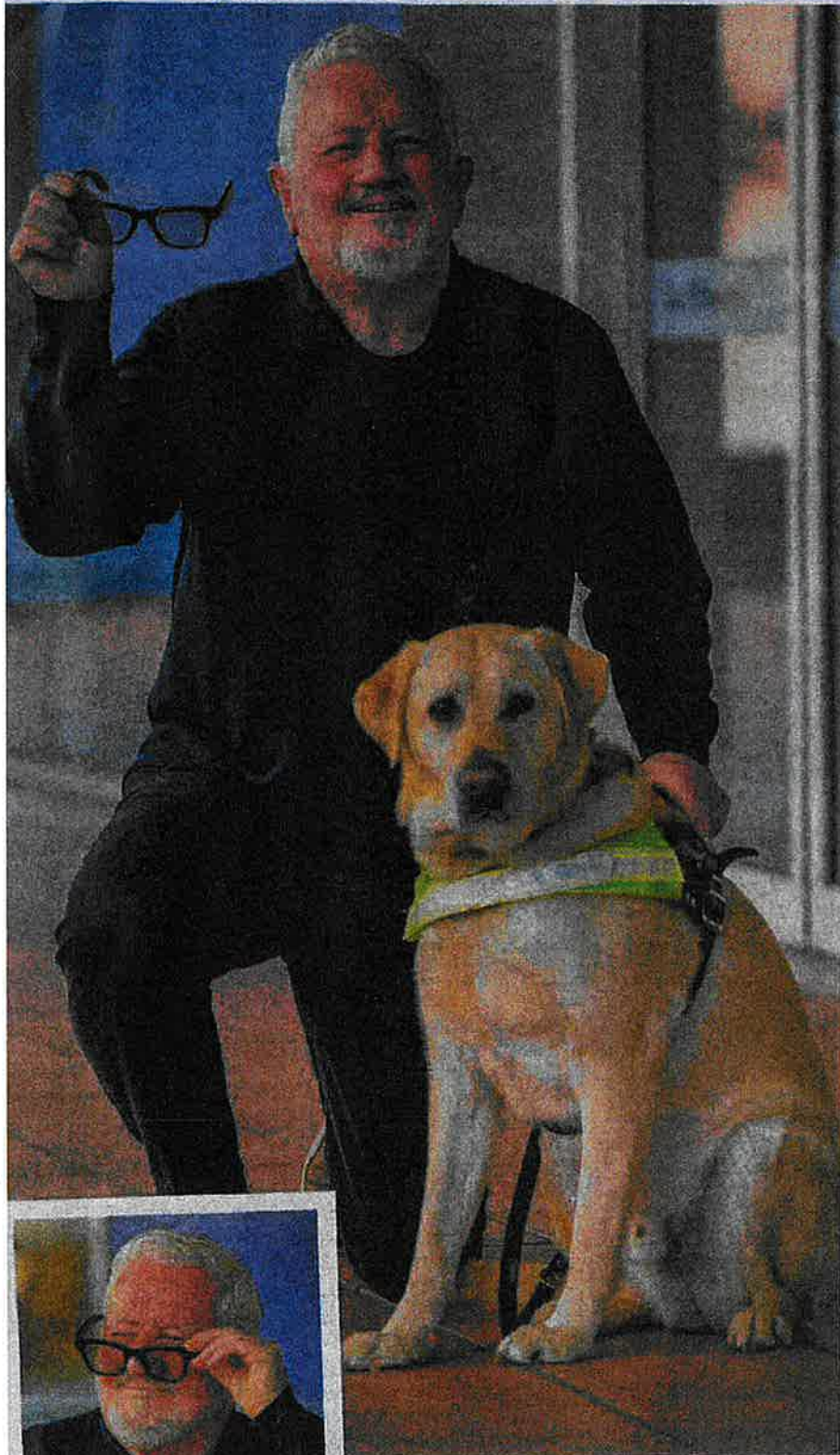


Controversial AI devices help the vision-impaired

# Glasses changed my life - don't ban them



Michael Hutchison, who lost his sight and now uses Ray-Ban Meta glasses, with his dog Stirling. Picture: Roy VanDerVegt

**Talara McHugh**

AI-assisted glasses have faced intense public scrutiny due to privacy concerns but for members of the blind and low-vision community the controversial technology is proving invaluable.

Michael Hutchison lost his sight in 2015 and began using Ray-Ban Meta glasses about eight months ago, describing them as a gamechanger.

"For me, the Meta glasses have become far more than a piece of technology," the 72-year-old from Dulwich said.

"They have become an important part of how I navigate my everyday life, providing information, reassurance and, most importantly, greater independence.

"I wear them pretty much from when I get up to when I go to sleep. They have become my safety net."

Mr Hutchison was a successful town planner when, in 2014, he became blind in his left eye following routine laser surgery.

Because his right eye was also deteriorating, he needed to have the same surgery on it and unfortunately ended up losing his vision entirely.

He was later diagnosed with haemorrhagic occlusive retinal vasculitis, a rare condition triggered by a severe allergic reaction to vancomycin, the antibiotic used to wash out his eyes, causing his immune system to shut down the blood supply to his optic nerve.

"It was pretty traumatic and a big change to my life," he said.

"I stopped work, I couldn't drive or do the gardening. Simple things like reading letters just went out the door."

For Mr Hutchison, using the glasses has given him greater confidence and independence.

Ray-Ban Meta glasses, which start from \$337, have a built-in camera, microphone and open-air speakers and can be used to describe surroundings, read text and identify objects.

They can also be used to connect with sighted volunteers for real-time assistance through the Be My Eyes app

“

**An important part of how I navigate my everyday life**

**Michael Hutchison**

similar to the visual aid app used by the character Tess Avery in the CTV series Sight Unseen.

Mr Hutchison recently used the glasses while at a blood donation appointment.

"I normally ring when I'm downstairs and they hadn't turned their phones on, so they didn't answer my call," he said.

"So I got a guy in Sydney and he was able to take me through the doors to the lift, help me find the button and then took me from the lift to the counter.

"Now if I'm not certain about where I am, I've got a third eye."

The glasses have also made everyday tasks such as reading easier.

"When I go to cafes I can put a menu up in front of the glasses and it'll read it to me," Mr Hutchison said.

"So instead of having to have someone alongside me to read it, I can now do that independently and that's a big deal for me."

Rather than rushing to ban AI glasses out of fear, there needed to be more understanding about how they can be used as accessibility tools, he said.

"Privacy is really important and the government definitely needs to be looking at people that are misusing it," he said.

"But I worry about somebody who is legally blind, uses a white stick and doesn't have a guide dog, who is at a park or cafe with Meta glasses on being told they can't use them.

"Because that would be a blow to somebody who uses them for accessibility and confidence."

