

National campaign to cut deaths from stroke

An Australia-wide campaign begins today (18 September) to reduce the number of deaths from stroke, Australia's second greatest killer after heart disease.

The National Stroke Foundation says stroke patients don't get to hospital fast enough because the signs of stroke are not recognised.

Launching National Stroke Week to raise awareness of the signs of stroke, National Stroke Foundation CEO, Dr Erin Lalor, said the faster a patient gets diagnosed and treated, the greater the chance of reducing damage to the brain.

"In 2006, Australians will suffer 53,000 new and recurrent strokes – that's one stroke every 10 minutes but those suffering from a stroke and people with them often don't recognise the signs," Dr Lalor said. "The **FAST** campaign is a simple test for stroke."

FAST stands for **F**acial weakness, **A**rm weakness, **S**peech difficulty, **T**ime to act. Using the **FAST** test involves asking three simple questions:

- **F**ace – Can the person smile, has their mouth or eyes drooped?
- **A**rms – Can the person raise both arms?
- **S**peech – Can the person speak clearly and understand what you say?
- **T**ime – Act **FAST** and get medical attention.

Patients who are admitted to a hospital within three hours for treatment and are managed in a dedicated stroke unit have a greater chance of surviving a stroke and will have a better recovery. If most stroke patients were able to get appropriate treatment and the number of hospitals with dedicated stroke units was increased, more than 1,300 people a year could be saved from death or disability from stroke.

The signs of stroke may occur alone or together and include:

- Weakness, numbness or paralysis – in the face, arm or leg on either or both sides of the body
- Difficulty speaking or understanding
- Dizziness, loss of balance or unexplained fall
- Loss of vision, sudden blurred or decreased vision in one or both eyes
- Headache – usually severe and abrupt onset or a change in the pattern of headaches
- Difficulty swallowing

It's important to get medical attention even if the signs only last for a short period.

The National Stroke Foundation aims to save 110,000 Australians from death and disability from stroke over the next 10 years.

For editors: Currently only two per cent of eligible patients receive intravenous tissue plasminogen activator (tPA) within three hours of an ischaemic stroke (a stroke caused by a blockage of a brain vessel rather than a bleeding vessel). Only about 20 per cent of hospitals have dedicated stroke units and these are estimated to treat about 25 per cent of strokes occurring in Australia. If ten per cent of eligible patients received tPA and 80 per cent of hospitals had dedicated stroke units, more than 1,300 lives could be saved from death or disability in a 12-month period.

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