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Report finds Australian stroke care getting worse not better

A review of stroke services in Australian hospitals has revealed some important care practices have deteriorated, and very few patients are getting life saving treatment.

The National Stroke Foundation has today released a report on the treatment of over 3000 people with acute stroke during 2008, taken from its second audit of acute stroke services.

The audit found there has been little or no improvement since the first audit conducted in 2007, and in some cases the quality of stroke treatment has gotten worse.

“The treatment of stroke patients remains inadequate, with processes known to save lives from death and disability not used in enough cases,” said Dr Erin Lalor, Chief Executive Officer of the National Stroke Foundation.

The National Stroke Foundation says the most significant shortfalls in Australian stroke services include:

- **Only one in two patients was treated on a stroke unit.** Stroke unit care involves treatment by a specialised multidisciplinary team and is proven to improve survival rates and increase independence.
- **Only three per cent of patients with ischaemic stroke were thrombolysed** with the clot busting drug tissue plasminogen activator (tPA). When successful in clearing the blood clot this treatment is known to increase the chance of a better outcome following stroke by 30 per cent¹.
- **No improvement in discharge planning processes** that are vital to ensuring the ongoing safety and recovery of patients after they leave hospital. This was identified in 2007 as an area to be improved so patients would feel safe and prepared enough to continue their recovery from stroke at home.

“The audit shows there is an urgent need for federal and state governments to devote greater resources to stroke care to reduce the impact of Australia’s second biggest killer,” said Dr Lalor.

Positively, the audit found there was improvement in providing patients with appropriate medication to help prevent further stroke and the timeliness of assessment for speech pathology, occupational therapy, and physiotherapy had also improved since 2007.

The nation-wide audit comprises two parts – an Organisation Survey (released in August) which showed 22 additional specialised stroke care units were still needed and the Clinical Report that measures the performance of existing stroke services against recommendations made in the Clinical Guidelines for Acute Stroke Management.

Media contact: Kellie Furey 03 9670 1000 or 0415 563 811

¹ The ATLANTIS ECASS and NINDS rt-PA Study Group Investigators. Association of outcome with early stroke treatment: Pooled analysis of ATLANTIS, ECASS, and NINDS rt-PA stroke trials. *Lancet*. 2004;363(9411):768-74.