



December 1, 2011

AUSTRALIANS STILL MISS OUT ON LIFE-SAVING STROKE TREATMENT AND CARE

Only seven per cent of Australian stroke patients eligible for life-saving treatment received it in 2010, a new report on acute stroke care services has revealed.

The National Stroke Foundation Acute Services Clinical Audit, which provides a snapshot of acute stroke care in Australia, also shows that patients who do not get access to a hospital with a stroke unit are far less likely to receive an appropriate level of care and treatment, increasing their chances of death and severe disability.

Launching the report in Melbourne today National Stroke Foundation CEO Dr Erin Lalor said one of the reasons for the low incidence of stroke patients receiving clot-busting drugs in Australia was delay in getting to an appropriate hospital. The clot-busting treatment, known as thrombolysis, must be administered within a few short hours of the onset of stroke symptoms and only one in three people experiencing symptoms of stroke arrived within three hours.

“This report confirms the importance of getting in an ambulance and to a hospital with a stroke unit at the first sign of stroke,” Dr Lalor said.

“Stroke patients who are not treated at a hospital with a stroke unit are less likely to receive the standard of care recommended in the clinical guidelines for stroke and therefore more likely to suffer permanent disability,” Dr Lalor said.

“Once a stroke occurs it is vital that patients get to a hospital and receive treatment immediately,” Dr Lalor said.

“It is imperative that everyone can recognise the signs of stroke so immediate action can be taken to save lives and reduce disability.”

The Acute Services Clinical Audit examined the treatment of over 3000 people with acute stroke during 2010.

Stroke is Australia’s second leading cause of death and a major cause of adult disability. A stroke occurs in Australia every 10 minutes.

But Dr Lalor said stroke was not only preventable but treatable if prompt specialist medical care was given.

The National Stroke Foundation promotes the FAST message as a way of identifying the earliest signs of stroke.

FAST stands for Face – Has the person’s mouth drooped? Arms – Can they raise both arms? Speech – Is their speech slurred? Can they understand you? And Time – if any of these symptoms are present call an ambulance (000) immediately.



Dr Lalor said the FAST campaign was known to improve awareness of the onset of stroke and has increased calls to ambulances. She said the FAST message needed improved funding so it could be rolled out in community awareness programs in all states.

“The treatment of stroke patients remains inadequate, with processes known to save lives from death and disability not used in enough cases.”

The audit found although there were improvements in various processes of care since 2007, many gaps remained.

“Right now in Australia people who have a stroke do not have any guarantee that they will be able to receive the level of care that is available, and that should be available, to every individual,” Dr Lalor said.

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

- **Only seven per cent of patients with ischaemic stroke were thrombolysed** with the clot busting drug tissue plasminogen activator (rtPA). 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.
- **Too few people with stroke are arriving at hospital quickly** - prompt assessment and treatment on a stroke unit in hospital saves lives – better funding is needed for broad community awareness campaigns.
- **People who do not make it to a stroke unit are less likely to get appropriate care** and are more likely to suffer permanent disability than stroke patients treated on a stroke unit.

“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.

Copies of the report can be downloaded from www.strokefoundation.com.au

For media inquiries call Ebru Yaman: 0488 380 484 or 03) 9670 1000

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.