

Austin launches major stroke trial

THE AUSTIN is the first Australian hospital to launch the final phase of the 'AVERT' very early rehabilitation trial. This large, randomised controlled trial tests whether commencing rehabilitation very early after stroke results in fewer deaths and less disability than current care. The intervention is delivered by a physiotherapist and nurse team.

'Over the past five years we have developed and trialled the protocol we are using for this trial,' said Dr Julie Bernhardt, physiotherapist and AVERT program director. 'Now it's time to test whether it works and find out how much it would cost to implement in the real world.'

The development program has included a collaborative project with RMIT University software engineering students to build an online randomisation and data management system for AVERT.

Physiotherapist Dr Janice Collier, the AVERT program manager, helped build the system. She said: 'AVERT Online is cutting edge and will ensure high-quality data procedures throughout the trial.'

The final phase of AVERT will involve 10 Australian hospitals,



Research team (from left): Tara Sharply (Austin main investigator), Mark Hindson (senior clinician physiotherapist), Dr Julie Bernhardt (AVERT program director), and Cathy Nall (director of physiotherapy, Austin Health).

with over 2000 stroke patients recruited in the next four years. Although Julie and her team are based at the National Stroke Research Institute in Melbourne, at each hospital there is a main investigator (in most cases a physiotherapist) who has taken on the role of making sure the job gets done. At Austin Health, physiotherapist Tara Sharply will continue in her role as the main investigator, a role she has held for the past two years.

AVERT will be rolled out to a further seven hospitals over the next few months: Royal Perth (WA), Flinders Medical Centre

(SA), Westmead, Wyong, and Newcastle Mater hospitals (NSW), and Royal Melbourne and Warrigal hospitals (Vic). Other hospitals will be coming on board early in 2007. Physiotherapists also make up the bulk of the blinded assessors who will interview patients in their homes at three and 12 months after their stroke.

Dr Bernhardt says the support of the research program provided by Austin Hospital nurses, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, medical staff, and management has been outstanding.

'Doing research in a busy clinical environment is challenging

at any time,' she said. 'Without a willingness on the part of the hospital staff to get involved and be flexible, this project would never have happened.'

Brooke Parsons, a stroke survivor and consumer representative involved in the trial, said: 'To see staff from different disciplines working together to find better ways to treat stroke is exceptional and exciting.'

This research has been supported by the National Heart Foundation and a National Health and Medical Research Council grant of \$2.8 million is funding the five-year trial.