

Physiotherapist-led team secures \$2.8 million

Physiotherapist Julie Bernhardt and her team at the National Stroke Research Institute (NSRI), Austin Health, have been awarded a \$2.8 million NHMRC grant to fund the next stage of their research.

THE STUDY, known as AVERT, is examining whether very early rehabilitation intervention improves the outcomes for people with stroke. Although grants from the National Heart Foundation and Affinity Health are already funding the study, the NHMRC grant will enable the research team to perform the next phase of their research.

The project will build on pilot work which identified that a small

group of stroke patients with severe physical dysfunction at four weeks post-stroke did achieve ongoing improvements in balance and mobility over the subsequent twelve weeks, and that nearly half achieved independent walking, and a similar proportion returned home.

'Traditionally, patients are left in bed for days or up to a week after their stroke,' said Dr Bernhardt. 'The rehabilitation we are testing takes a much more

prompt and active approach, and is exploring whether intervention within hours of a stroke leads to fewer deaths, improved mobility and a better quality of life.'

Unlike other stroke research which tests new drugs, this study evaluates the effect of early intervention by physiotherapists and nurses. 'Preliminary research from Norway suggests that early rehabilitation is beneficial for stroke patients,' said Dr Bernhardt. '... and we're now testing that in a controlled trial.'

'We have 48 000 new strokes every year in Australia and one-third of those are left with a significant disability,' said Dr Bernhardt. 'We urgently need simple interventions that are

suitable for a large number of patients if we are to reduce the personal and community burden imposed by strokes.'

Involving over 2000 patients from ten hospitals around Australia, the study will take five years to complete. The cost of early stroke rehabilitation to the government and the community will also be assessed.

The grant is a share of the recently announced \$292 million to fund more than 600 research projects in Australian universities, hospitals, and medical research institutes. This brings the Federal Government's investment in health and medical research, through the NHMRC, to \$450 million this year, double the 1999 figure.

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