



## ***AVERT team awarded \$2.8 million grant***

Thanks to the **National Health and Medical Research Council**, we have recently been awarded a **\$2.8million grant** which will go a long way to helping us carry out the third phase of AVERT (a carefully controlled trial of early rehabilitation after stroke). This final phase will be carried out over the next five years in at least ten hospitals around Australia, involving over 2000 patients.

This grant, along with funding from the **National Heart Foundation** and **Affinity Health**, will be conscientiously used to fund for this much-needed stroke research.

### **Other achievements for 2005**

It has continued to be an exciting year for us.

- We have recruited 69 stroke patients to AVERT from the Austin and St. Vincent's Hospitals, Melbourne.
- Over 30 AVERT participants have completed their 12 month follow-up assessments. Well done and thank you to all those participants that have hung in there and made themselves available. We really appreciate your efforts! You are helping to improve the health of stroke survivors.
- During July and August, Tara Sharpley, AVERT physiotherapist at Austin Hospital, travelled to Trondheim, Norway to commence her Masters by Research project. This trip was funded by the FJ O'Rourke Fellowship, and enabled us learn more about how early rehabilitation is delivered in this centre of excellence, as well other stroke units across Europe. (page 2).
- Brian 'Mick' Lark provides a personal account of experience of having a stroke, and participation in AVERT (page 2).
- We have also been working on the development of a new data system that will allow us to scan paper forms with

patient information directly into the computer, rather than having to enter all of the information by hand. This is complete now and will make management of our data for Phase 3 much easier.

- Early in 2005 we commenced a collaborative project with 5 final year RMIT students to build us a web-based randomisation and data management system. The web site will be called AVERT Online. This project means that AVERT staff at each hospital can securely and conveniently use the internet to enrol patients in AVERT. The trial team will also be able to manage the mass of data that will be generated from this very big study. It is almost built and we will be testing it over the coming months. We will keep you posted on developments.

### **What's happening next?**

By early 2006 we will have completed recruitment for this phase of AVERT. Although it will be some months before final results from this phase of the study are available, we will be starting up Phase 3 at various hospitals as soon as approvals are obtained.

In the coming months, we will be contacting our interested participating centres around Australia to discuss start-up preparation. We may also arrange to visit your hospital to talk to the whole team about participating in AVERT.

**Many thanks to all of you who continue to contribute to and support this research: stroke survivors and family, carers, doctors, nurses and physiotherapists from various hospitals and rehabilitation centres. Your participation is truly valued.**

If you would like to contact us, please call Dr Julie Bernhardt (Principal Investigator) on 03 9496 2783



*A note from Tara, AVERT physiotherapist at Austin Hospital about her recent study trip:*

In 2004 I was awarded the F J O'Rourke Fellowship from Austin Hospital which provided me with the opportunity to spend 2 weeks at the 'Slagenheten' (Stroke Unit) at St Olavs Hospital in Trondheim, Norway. Preliminary research from St Olavs has shown promising patient outcomes, and their current practices form the basis of AVERT.

I was fortunate enough to spend time with the head physio and gained a first hand view of how they treat their patients. The opportunity to work with this stroke team provided information that was invaluable, and something that I hope I can lend to other physiotherapists and nursing staff involved with AVERT. I also spent time collecting data for my Post Graduate Masters, for which I am looking at differences in stroke unit care between Austin Hospital, Melbourne and Trondheim.

I gained so much from the 2 weeks in Trondheim, both professionally and personally. This was my first opportunity to travel out of Australia. Norway is such a picturesque country which made the time all the more memorable. The dedicated staff at St Olavs were extremely accommodating and friendly. They ensured that I was able to take full advantage of my time spent in the Stroke Unit, and the unique sightseeing in Norway! Not to mention assisting with translation!

At the completion of my Norway experience I also travelled throughout Europe, London and parts of Canada and was fortunate enough to visit other major stroke units. Not only did I get to promote Austin Hospital and create interest for future involvement in AVERT, but I also gained a glimpse into their stroke units and health care systems.

Overall, the total time I spent overseas on this trip is something I will never forget - especially since I came back engaged! I feel the Norway experience and the knowledge that I gained, can assist with the clinical side of AVERT, which in turn will help those who have suffered a stroke.



Tara and Anne Loege, senior stroke physiotherapist at St Olavs Hospital, Norway.

*Brian 'Mick' Lark is one of the 69 people who have volunteered to participate in AVERT so far.*

Speaking of the stroke he had in August last year, Brian says, "I just got up out of bed in the morning and didn't feel right...I deteriorated throughout the rest of that day." Fortunately though, he was taken to the hospital quite soon after the stroke. By the next morning in hospital, Brian remembers he had "no use of the left arm, my left leg was very weak even though I could still walk, and the left side of my face drooped."

When asked why he agreed to take part in AVERT, Brian says, "I was keen to help out, I didn't want anybody to go through what I was going through."

Over a year on since his stroke, Brian describes himself as being back to 99.9% of how he was prior to his stroke. He reports still having occasional weakness in his left arm and leg, but that hasn't stopped him from returning to driving, travelling interstate with his wife and friends and playing 18 holes of golf a week!

To Brian, "rehabilitation is the key" to making good physical recovery after having a stroke. "I hope I can encourage people to use all the facilities that are available, for example physiotherapy. I hope that people will recover just like me. I consider myself the luckiest person on earth."



Brian has been able to get back to working in his toolshed.



Brian practising his golf swing!



**COLLABORATION WORKS! LINKING  
STROKE RESEARCHERS AND  
SOFTWARE ENGINEERING  
STUDENTS TO CREATE AVERT  
ONLINE**

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University

**Who is the AVERT team?**

**Background:** AVERT (A Very Early Rehabilitation Trial) phase III is an investigator driven, multicentre, randomised controlled trial of very early rehabilitation. Trial quality will depend on effective and efficient systems for randomisation, data collection and communication across multiple hospital sites. As a trial with a big agenda but a small budget, we needed to find creative ways of developing the information technology (IT) trial resources. We approached RMIT University to help develop AVERT Online, a web-based system for trial administration.

**Methods:** Five software engineering students are developing AVERT Online as part of their final year elective. AVERT Online will use a centralised web portal accessible through an Internet browser. It will consist of an intuitive patient management user interface, online address book for effective communications, reminder module to assist in administrative tasks and an automated import module for acquiring trial data from external sources. Reports can also be generated on trial progress.

**Results:** The system design and user interface are complete. AVERT Online will be ready to deploy before the end of 2005.

**Conclusions:** This collaboration has produced a vital tool for AVERT and provides valuable industry experience for students who have used industry best practice for software development.

