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NWRH wants to keep stroke service

Burnie Advocate, Burnie

FAIR CARE Stroke victim nominates hospital staff for award after life-saving service

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Tess Kelly

STROKE nurse Nellie Cole can pinpoint the exact patients who would not be with us today if it weren't for the introduction of specialist telehealth services at the North West Regional Hospital.

The stroke clinical nurse consultant holds those patients very close to her heart.

"They keep me coming back to work every day," she said.

Ms Cole immediately threw the North-West Coast's hat in the ring after hearing about the expansion of the Bridging the Urban and Regional Divide in Stroke Care (BUILDS) program at a conference.

The problem was that the program - which connects stroke inpatients with a specialist neurologist - was only set to be expanded to two hospitals within Victoria.

"I put my hand up and said, 'If it's telehealth, why can't other hospitals apply?'."

Access to expert care

Thanks to Ms Cole's initiative, the NWRH was chosen as a recipient of the 12-month trial of the program, which was funded by the Eastern Health Foundation and donations from John and Margaret Bland.

Ms Cole said the introduction of the program has

meant every stroke inpatient has had access to consultations with stroke expert Dr Philip Choi, no matter how minor their symptoms.

Dr Choi helps interpret scans, analyse the future impacts of stroke, the likelihood that the patient's symptoms will improve and the risk of another stroke.

Ms Cole said Dr Choi's input was critical in providing equal access for stroke patients on the North-West Coast.

"It should not matter where you are when you have your stroke, you should have equal access to the same level of care and expertise across the country," she said.

"If we can provide good stroke care in emergency and also to our inpatient groups, our number of people who survive strokes increase, and our level of disability from stroke in our community will decrease."

Since 2019, the hospital has also implemented telehealth access in the emergency department to help staff make decisions about diagnosis and treatment options.

Coastal families benefit from consults

One local family that has benefitted firsthand from

the BUILDS program is the Robinsons.

When Max Robinson experienced mild and unusual stroke symptoms in June, his wife Jan was "very keen" to have a consult with Dr Choi.

"We were able to find out exactly what had happened, and we now know the risks of it happening again," Mrs Robinson said.

"It was just so comforting to know we could have that level of care in our own hospital."

Mrs Robinson said the ability to ask questions and receive a deep explanation through the telehealth service could not have been improved.

"This is equality of health-care, and we need that, I want that," she said.

Stroke service must continue

The common signs of a stroke include a drooped face, the inability for a person to lift their arms and slurred speech.

Before the BUILDS program was introduced, allied health stroke coordinator Amy Turner said patients who experienced only mild symptoms would not have received such an in-depth management plan.

"But now, because everyone gets that same intervention, the people who

would have previously been missed are not at less risk of a stroke happening again," Ms Turner said.

The Robinsons were so pleased with the care they received, Mrs Robinson nominated Ms Cole and the stroke team for a Spot On! award.

The award recognised the provision of timely access to specialist care and understanding and responding to the health literacy needs of patients and their families.

"My main reason for putting the nomination in was because this needs to be a service that keeps going," Mrs Robinson said.

"The major thing as well was the comfort we felt from having that expert stroke neurologist involved in Max's care.

"I just thought there's no way this service can finish."

The state government has agreed to fund the program after the trial period ended in September.

Ms Cole said the award, patient feedback and positive outcomes helped the team argue for the program to stay put.

"Being acknowledged for facilitating the sharing of information at the level that the person is at is really quite lovely," she said.



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Ms Cole and the stroke team were winners of the Spot On! Award after they were nominated by the Robinson family.
Picture by Tess Kelly