

MEDIA RELEASE



The simple test that could save thousands of lives

Older Australians unaware of serious heart condition

Sydney, Australia – 6 October, 2010: Many older Australians are unaware they could be living with a serious heart condition that significantly increases their risk of stroke and heart failure.

According to Newspoll research released today, despite around 2.4 million Australians¹ aged 65 years and over living with a warning sign that increases their risk of atrial fibrillation (AF), only 3 in 10 in this group believe they are at increased risk. Almost half of respondents are also unaware of the condition.

AF, which causes an irregular heartbeat, frequently goes undiagnosed but patients are up to seven times more likely to have a stroke and up to three times more likely to experience heart failure as a result of the condition². Warning signs and contributing conditions include an irregular pulse rate, high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease and obesity.

Professor Ben Freedman, a cardiologist at Concord Hospital and Deputy Dean of the Sydney Medical School at the University of Sydney said, “AF is now a very common condition with one in five at risk of developing AF during their life. Unfortunately, the community is largely unaware of AF or the conditions that predispose to it. People are not aware that simply checking their own pulse could lead to a diagnosis of AF and treatment which could save their life or prevent a stroke.”

“Due to this low level of awareness, the condition may go untreated, leading to a substantial number of hospitalisations for AF and its potentially fatal complications such as stroke, that are largely preventable,” said Professor Freedman. “In the last 10 years, hospitalisations for AF have increased by 67% to 47,000 per year, compared to a 10% increase for all cardiovascular disease.”

The research shows that despite more than 90 percent of the 3.6 million Australians aged 65 years and over believing an irregular heart beat is a serious condition, more than 1.7 million in this age group have never heard of AF.

It is estimated that 240,000 Australians are living with AF at a cost to the economy of more than \$1.25 billion. However, the cost of treating the consequences of this often undiagnosed condition is much greater². While AF affects Australians of all ages, it is particularly common in older people with approximately one in 10 of those over the age of 75 living with the condition³.

The national survey also found that despite it being easy to do, only 3 in 10 Australians aged 65 years and over check their own pulse at least every six months.

“Checking your pulse is easy and can diagnose an irregular heartbeat,” said Professor Freedman. “An irregular heartbeat from AF causes the pumping of the heart to be less efficient and can put you at risk of stroke, heart failure and death.”

Trudie Lobban, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of the Atrial Fibrillation Association said, “I encourage all Australians to check their pulse regularly to monitor their risk of developing this condition that if left untreated, can have fatal consequences.”

“We get our blood pressure checked and we get our cholesterol levels checked. Now it is time to take the simple step of checking our pulse rate to improve our heart health,” said Mrs Lobban.

The research also found greater awareness and education about AF could help improve diagnosis with almost half of respondents believing they would check their pulse more regularly if they knew more about the condition.

“AF can affect anyone, at any age and any time. Anyone concerned about AF or their pulse rate should consult their GP,” said Mrs Lobban.

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About Atrial Fibrillation Association – Australia:

The Atrial Fibrillation Association - Australia (AFA-AU) is part of an international charity which provides information, support and access to established, new or innovative treatments for AF.

The AFA-AU aims to advance the education of the medical profession and the general public about AF, and promote research into the management of AF.

For more information, visit www.atrialfibrillation-au.org or call 1800 050 267.

About the research:

The national AF awareness survey was conducted by Newspoll Market Research, Australia’s leading opinion polling company.

The research was carried out via telephone across all states of Australia from 10-12 September 2010. It involved approximately 300 respondents aged 65 years and over, with respondents selected via a random sample process.

The survey was undertaken by the AFA-AU and was funded by an unrestricted grant from sanofi-aventis.

References

¹ Newspoll data is weighted and projected to the latest ABS population statistics. The Newspoll survey indicates that approximately 2.4 million Australians aged 65 years and over have suffered from one or more risk factors for AF, including high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, obesity or a stroke,

² PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2010, The Economic Costs of Atrial Fibrillation in Australia

³ Heart Foundation, 2009, Atrial Fibrillation: Who does atrial fibrillation affect? Accessed at: http://www.heartfoundation.org.au/Heart_Information/Heart_Conditions/Atrial_Fibrillation/Pages/default.aspx