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New portable state-of-the-art machine offers world class technology to liver patients

NSW Hepatitis Awareness Week July 23 – 29

More people with viral hepatitis living in Sydney’s central and inner west can have their liver disease assessed painlessly at more locations, thanks to the delivery of a new, portable state-of-the-art Fibroscan machine.

The $70,000 machine uses ultrasound technology to measure stiffness in the liver, which indicates liver cirrhosis or scarring, avoiding the need for a painful liver biopsy when being assessed for treatment.

Royal Prince Alfred Hospital (RPA) AW Morrow Gastroenterology and Liver Centre already offers patients access to a Fibroscan machine. However, the new portable version will, for the first time, be offered to people with hepatitis who access inner city clinics and Canterbury Hospital. The machine may also travel to Dubbo.

Professor Strasser said patients had embraced the Fibroscan machine.

“It doesn't hurt, takes only a few minutes and provides instant information about the state of their liver disease,” Professor Strasser said.

Professor Strasser said excellent treatments were available for both hepatitis B and C. However, many people put off attending a clinic and by the time they did, some had developed severe liver disease or liver cancer, for which survival outcomes were poor. She said these complications may have been prevented by treatment.

“Due to its unpleasant nature, concern about the need for a liver biopsy has been a barrier to hepatitis treatment for up to 40 per cent of all persons with known hepatitis C,” Professor Strasser said.

“For patients with hepatitis C and B, a biopsy is no longer required to access government funded hepatitis treatment. Instead, by doing a Fibroscan, we can assess how much liver damage is present, which helps us to make decisions about treatment.

“Given the high prevalence of hepatitis C and B within SLHD, the Fibroscan machines can offer more people with viral hepatitis the chance to undergo this assessment,” she said.

Around 8,000 people with hepatitis C live within the SLHD catchment, many of them undiagnosed.

Within SLHD, the incidence of primary liver cancer (7.7 per 100,000) far exceeded the NSW State average (5.2 per 100,000). Most liver cancer was due to hepatitis B or hepatitis C.
Professor Strasser said the liver was the largest internal organ and responsible for about 500 bodily functions.

“Your overall health and vitality, to a great extent, depends upon the health of your liver,” she said.

“Because the liver performs so many vital functions, liver damage can impact almost all body systems. If you want to maintain optimum health, you need to love your liver.”

Professor Strasser said any patients with known viral hepatitis should be referred to have a Fibroscan. The procedure was painless, was over in 10-15 minutes and gave an instant result. At the same time, the patient has an opportunity to discuss treatment for their condition.

In addition, anyone from the following categories should consider a hepatitis C or B test and discuss with their GP:

- Current or past Injecting Drug User (IDU)
- Recipients of organs, tissues, blood or blood products in Australia before February 1990, or overseas at any time
- People with tattoos, or skin piercings
- People born in countries with high hepatitis B or C prevalence
- Sexual partners of people with hepatitis.
- Household contact of people with hepatitis
- People whose mother had viral hepatitis

Healthy Liver Tips

- get regular health check-ups, including liver function tests
- avoid or limit consumption of alcohol and recreational drugs
- avoid toxic substances such as pesticides, solvents and paint thinners
- eat a healthy, well-balanced diet
- get regular, moderate exercise
- drink plenty of water
- take no more than the recommended doses of medications
- be careful when using multiple drugs, herbs, or drugs and herbs together
- inform healthcare providers about all drugs, herbs, supplements, and alternative therapies you are using
- if hepatitis c infection present get vaccinated against hepatitis A and B

Hepatitis Awareness Week takes place 23-29 July 2012.