Media Release

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St George Hospital clinicians attract NHMRC grant for cancer research

A team of researchers from St George Hospital has successfully attracted a National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) grant worth more than $300,000, over three years, to improve outcomes for cancer patients who have, or are at high risk, of developing swallowing problems.

The aim of the research is to improve the quality of life for patients undergoing head and neck radiotherapy who have swallowing disorders as a consequence of their treatment.

Head and neck cancer accounts for around 3.5 percent of all cancers, and is the sixth most common malignancy in Australia. Annually, 2,500 new cases are diagnosed.

According to Professor Ian Cook, gastroenterologist and Head of the Swallow Centre at St George Hospital, radiotherapy has the potential to damage the nerves and muscles in the throat that are crucial to swallow function.

“Preliminary results confirm our belief that severe swallowing dysfunction is currently both an under-reported and under-recognised long-term complication of radiotherapy. This non-malignant complication can cause life-threatening lung infections and poor nutrition,” Professor Cook said.

“The fact that severe swallow dysfunction frequently only makes its symptomatic appearance at a time when patients are being reassured that they are cured of their cancer, means that these patients are ‘dropping off the radar’ at a critical time when they may be at increased risk from swallow-related complications,” he said.

Professor Cook said that limiting the radiation dose to the muscles critical to swallowing can reduce the incidence and severity of dysphagia (swallow dysfunction). This requires identification and prioritisation of particular muscles, according to their importance to function, for dose constraint.

“The St George Hospital Swallow Centre has been studying the causes and treatment of swallowing disorders, from a wide variety of causes, for more than two decades,” he said.

“Importantly, this latest research will assist in identifying patients most susceptible to swallowing-related complications so that they might prevent these problems in future, as well as enable better selection of patients likely to benefit from specific treatments.

“It will also provide radiation oncologists with evidence on how radiation doses can affect swallowing function and will help in future treatment planning to reduce the incidence and severity of dysphagia and its life-threatening complications,” Professor Cook said.

Researchers undertaking the study include, Professor Ian Cook, gastroenterologist, Dr Michael Szczesniak, post-doctoral Research Fellow, Dr Julia Maclean, speech pathologist, Associate Professor Peter Graham, radiation oncologist and Dr Tahr Omari, senior NHMRC Research Fellow, Women’s and Children’s Health, Adelaide.

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