

Increased role for pharmacists in detecting atrial fibrillation

Pharmacists are being urged to help stem the growing health burden of atrial fibrillation (AF) through a number of measures including screening and detection, increased dialogue with patients and further efforts around medication adherence.

A new White Paper, released today by [hearts4heart](#), with contributions from organisations including the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia and the Pharmacy Guild of Australia, is calling for immediate action to manage the growing health issue of AF. Affecting 460,000 Australians, AF is a major cause of stroke (6,000 per year), heart failure, hospitalisation (60,000 per year) and death, with mortality rates almost doubling over the last two decades.

The White Paper, [Time to Change the Beat](#), recommends pharmacists increase their use of electronic blood pressure machines that also measure pulse and rhythm, or include an algorithm for AF, and says pharmacies should be encouraged to purchase this equipment, or look at funding options.

Alongside the White Paper release, hearts4heart has launched a national program, asking pharmacies to join its Atrial Fibrillation Awareness Week, which runs from 18-24 September.

Those who join the program will receive tools and collateral around AF. They will also be invited to post pictures of themselves on social media using pulse testing equipment, with a message about AF Awareness and tagging [@hearts4heart](#) and can win one of five Microlife Blood Pressure monitors which also measure pulse and heart rhythm.

Meanwhile, the White Paper also suggests community education materials are developed to aid consumer awareness of AF, some of which could be rolled out via pharmacies. These materials would highlight methods of detection, symptoms, treatment options and the link between AF and serious clinical outcomes, in particular stroke.

Another important role for pharmacists, the White Paper says, is in ensuring adherence to medication through MedsCheck. As the White Paper points out, this is particularly critical for new oral anticoagulants which a recent study shows have persistence rates of just 57 per cent over 2.5 years for AF patients.

“This White Paper casts some much-needed attention on atrial fibrillation as a major public health issue, which is draining the healthcare system of \$1.63 billion every year, and costing patients their health and their lives. We are pleased the White Paper proposes meaningful and achievable strategies which can reduce the burden of this terrible condition in Australia. We encourage pharmacies to get on board with the recommendations, join the AF Awareness Week Program and encourage others by posting their photos,” said Tanya Hall, CEO of hearts4heart.

Another key recommendation is that the availability of catheter ablation be improved, most importantly calling on Federal Health Minister Greg Hunt to include it on Part C of the Prostheses List, therefore requiring private insurers to cover the cost.

One of the country's leading heart rhythm experts, Dr David O'Donnell from the Austin Hospital in Melbourne, also welcomed the White Paper.

"As someone who has spent many years treating atrial fibrillation, I know all too well the true cost of this condition for Australians. I hope this White Paper results in improved treatment, diagnosis and awareness," he said.

"This paper supports our view that atrial fibrillation is a deeply concerning issue, which needs more attention for the alarming number of health issues, hospitalisations and deaths it causes every year. Action is needed on all fronts, and we are relying on pharmacists to play their part in implementing these recommendations as soon as possible," Ms Hall concluded.

The *Time to Change the Beat* White Paper presents clear recommendations to improve the detection and management of atrial fibrillation over the next five years. It calls for a range of measures (refer to White Paper for more detail) to improve:

- Screening and detection of atrial fibrillation in both general practice and pharmacy;
- Public understanding of atrial fibrillation, its relation to stroke, and to encourage self-detection;
- The medical management of atrial fibrillation, including treatment adherence; and
- Availability and accessibility of catheter ablation.

Contributors to the [White Paper](#) include: Dr Dominik Linz, Electrophysiologist, South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute, University of Adelaide; Dr Alex McLellan, Cardiologist and Electrophysiologist, Alfred Hospital and St Vincent's Hospital, Melbourne; Dr Peter Piazza, General Practitioner, Five Dock; Dr Joe Nicholas, General Practitioner, Fairfield; Pharmaceutical Society of Australia; Pharmacy Guild of Australia; National Stroke Foundation; National Heart Foundation; Medical Technology Association of Australia; Boehringer Ingelheim; Bristol Myers Squibb; Medtronic and Johnson and Johnson.

About Atrial Fibrillation

Atrial fibrillation is a major public health issue that requires immediate attention and action.

As the most common form of heart arrhythmia (irregular heartbeat), AF affects around 460,000 Australians, with up to 30 per cent remaining undiagnosed. It is associated with a five- to sevenfold increase in the risk of stroke and a threefold increase in the risk of heart failure.

Today, atrial fibrillation is a major cause of stroke (6,000 strokes annually), heart failure, hospitalisation (more than 60,000 hospitalisations annually) sudden death and cardiovascular disease, with direct annual healthcare costs of \$1.63 billion.

In contrast to other cardiovascular conditions which have seen declines in mortality in past years, mortality rates related to AF have almost doubled over the last two decades.

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