

Launch of NZ Spinal Cord Impairment Strategy

Every year in New Zealand around 130 to 180 people are diagnosed with spinal cord impairment (SCI). This can happen through injury, congenital cause or through a medical problem. Spinal cord impairment can affect babies, children and adults. Because we know so much about how to treat SCI in the long term, most people will have a normal or near to normal life expectancy. However this brings huge complexity to the lives of people with SCI, their families and care-givers and to medical professionals supporting their care.

Providing care to adults over the age of 15 years with SCI in New Zealand has been mixed in terms of outcomes, either immediately following injury or illness and in their long - term care, with many people suffering delays in treatment and complications directly related to their SCI. ACC and the Ministry of Health have been working with key stakeholders on a new national strategy called the NZ Spinal Cord Impairment Initiative. This initiative aims to provide all SCI patients with the best possible outcomes to enhance quality of life and to increase their ability to actively participate in society. The action plan seeks to ensure that all patients with traumatic spinal cord impairment are transferred as quickly as possible to the two acute spinal surgical and rehabilitation centers in New Zealand, one in Auckland in Counties Manukau and one in Christchurch (Burwood). Those 15yrs and under will be transferred to Starship. This is where most people will come for rehabilitation. However, accidents, births and illnesses happen all over New Zealand and what treatment is given in the immediate period is crucial and needs to be standard and consistent, in line with best practice. Getting the right care immediately, as in cardiac disease or stroke can make an enormous difference to the outcome.

It is also intended that all people with SCI will have access to the best possible quality of acute surgical and rehabilitation services, and access to the appropriate equipment, housing modification, specialist advice and consistency when dealing with ACC and the Ministry of Health. Some of the key parts of the strategy to ensure that New Zealanders do get the best possible care short and long-term after SCI include:

- Ensuring that medical professionals from around the country have access to the best and latest information on how to treat an acute injury, illness or congenital spinal problem
- Ensure rapid access to acute surgical and intensive care services 24/7 and ideally within 24 hours
- Ongoing care and management from a dedicated multidisciplinary team including spinal surgeons, intensive care clinicians, ward and rehabilitation based nursing and allied health
- Improve information sharing between centres
- Provide nationally consistent acute spinal surgical and rehabilitation services and extend community-based rehabilitation
- Review and align processes for access to equipment, housing modification and transport

- Develop peer support for people with SCI
- Build workforce capability
- Join up the other agencies who may be involved in SCI care, such as Housing New Zealand, The Ministry for Social Development, and the Ministry of Education

It is intended that the Counties Manukau Acute Spine Service in conjunction with the Auckland Spinal Rehabilitation Unit and Christchurch Hospital, in conjunction with the Burwood Spinal Rehabilitation Unit in Christchurch remain the centres of excellence for acute spinal cord impairment, surgery and rehabilitation, because evidence shows the best results are obtained by receiving SCI treatment and care at specialised centers of excellence. Both centers will also ensure that, all DHBs will have access to the best information on treating the acute phases of spinal injury or illness and for ongoing community rehabilitation to ensure that patients will have the best recovery possible. The New Zealand SCI initiative identifies key initiatives and timeframes for these to be delivered.

ENDS

For more information, please contact External Communications Manager, Lauren Young, on 021 823 590.