

Screen reveals pressure pointer

New hope in hypertension

EXCLUSIVE

Robyn Riley

A common cause of high blood pressure that affects about 600,000 Australians can be detected in a simple blood test that for some may lead to control of the so-called silent killer.

The key, say Victorian researchers, will be to encourage GPs to order the blood test to screen for primary aldosteronism (PA) when patients present with hypertension.

One in three adults has high blood pressure and research suggests in about 10 per cent the cause is PA.

This is a disease in which the adrenal glands produce too much of the hormone aldosterone, which controls sodium and potassium levels in the blood. Aldosterone also affects the health of the heart, kidneys and blood vessels.

While the disease is easily

treated with a cheap and readily available daily aldosterone-blocking pill or potentially cured with keyhole surgery if the cause is a tumour on the adrenal gland, many GPs have been taught PA is rare.

Consequently, many do not routinely check for it.

The blood test is a game-changer, says Jun Yang, an endocrinologist at the Hudson Institute of Medical Research, Monash University and Monash Health, who says PA is not only common but also far more harmful to the heart, brain and kidneys than other types of high blood pressure.

Last year Associate Professor Yang and her PhD student Renata Libianto led the research published in the Medical Journal of Australia that called for nationwide

screening for this disease.

The authors said the study suggested PA was much more

common than recognised and highlighted the central role GPs could play in its detection.

Professor Yang is now preparing to recruit GPs at primary care clinics for a randomised study in Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania she hopes will eventually lead to screening everyone with high blood pressure for PA.

"The GPs in the study will have software added to their clinics' already existing computer programs," she said.

"This software will prompt some with a button that automatically brings up the PA blood test request when treating a patient with high blood pressure.

"We will then study the

patient outcomes comparing when doctors screen for the disease with those who do not.”

Professor Yang’s parents were both diagnosed with PA after she started her research.

Her father Lisheng had been on four daily drugs and was still struggling to control his blood pressure. Following confirmation of PA he is now on a quarter of one tablet that controls his blood pressure “perfectly”, as is her mother Cherrie.

Melbourne GP John Malios discovered his high blood pressure was caused by PA about five years ago.

“(As GPs) we were always taught this was a rare condition,” he said. “It is not rare.”

Where Dr Malios had been on a number of medications to control his blood pressure, he said following the diagnosis and taking aldosterone-blocking medication, his disease was now under control.

“When you see something that stops a disease completely, and you have such a good effect on blood pressure, it is life-changing,” he said.

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