Pressure to know your number

By Professor Wilf Yeo*

Getting your blood pressure taken or “knowing your number” is something you need to keep a close eye on at any age. High blood pressure (hypertension) and high cholesterol are, as we know, major risk factors for cardiovascular diseases including heart attacks, stroke, kidney disease and dementia.

But here’s the sting. Getting your blood pressure and cholesterol checked is not something that is necessarily done when you go to the doctor. While many GPs will measure the blood pressure as part of a routine visit, it is not a normal Medicare item unless you belong to a particular risk group (i.e., you have diabetes or are over the age of 75).

So, unless you specifically ask to have your blood pressure and cholesterol levels checked, you may never know your number – and you may be unaware that you have a problem.

You should probably start having your blood pressure checked at least once every couple of years from the age of 18. You definitely need to know your blood pressure and cholesterol numbers from the age of 45. If a close member of your family, like your mother or brother, has suffered a heart attack, stroke or kidney disease at a young age, you need screening at a young age too. If you swap GPs regularly, you need to take your number with you so you can be adequately monitored.

For blood pressure we know that a lot of people are not being screened or receiving adequate treatment. This isn’t just a problem in the Illawarra, it is worldwide. In the medical fraternity, we call it the “rule of halves”. It says that half the people with hypertension don’t know that they have it. Of the half that do know, half are not being treated. Then half of those on treatment are not controlled to the target blood pressure, leaving us with only one eighth who are likely to receive adequate treatment. We also know that men are more vulnerable than women simply because they visit doctors less frequently.

The whole community should be concerned about ensuring that there is adequate screening for hypertension and high cholesterol from the age of 45, as the consequences of not knowing could be dire.

In my ideal world, hypertension and preventing cardiovascular disease would have the same profile as other health issues such as breast cancer screening. As it is a simple test, it could be done in a multitude of locations, from the local pharmacy to the community centre - even the workplace.

In the Illawarra we are taking steps to develop a new clinical service framework by opening a hypertension and cardiovascular risk clinic within the Illawarra Health and Medical Research Institute.
Institute on the University of Wollongong campus. We also recently ran a community campaign to raise awareness of the connection between hypertension and dementia with a similar program run with local GPs.

The clinic is a resource for local clinicians to refer patients with complex blood pressure and high cardiovascular disease risk. We are following National Heart Foundation Guidelines for the treatment and management of hypertension and we will be researching and evaluating the success of the guidelines in the clinic.

Patients referred to the clinic by their GPs are given 24-hour ambulatory blood pressure monitors so they can be monitored as they go about their normal activities. The clinic also provides us with an opportunity to study the condition.

Ultimately, the plan is to collaborate with GPs to develop a new clinical service framework for our region; one that includes practical, easy to access screening options for people of all ages and abilities.

While these are important steps, I strongly recommend that you take responsibility for having your blood pressure and cholesterol checked regularly. Get to know your number and keep it with you so that you have something to refer to as you move along in your life’s journey.

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