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Scans to snuff out cancer

Australia-wide trial could save smokers before deadly disease strikes

EXCLUSIVE
ROSE BRENNAN

LUNG cancer could be detected and treated before people have any symptoms under a groundbreaking program offering screening for the deadly disease for the very first time.

Only 16 per cent of people are alive five years after being diagnosed with lung cancer which is the leading cause of cancer deaths in Australia.

Under the trial, people aged over 55 who currently smoke or smoked in the past will be

offered low-grade CT scans to detect early signs of the cancer.

The trial aims to recruit about 2000 Australians and is being run in NSW at St Vincent's Hospital.

More than 12,700 people will be diagnosed with lung cancer this year.

St Vincent's thoracic expert Dr Emily Stone is the principal investigator for the program in NSW and needs to recruit 500 patients for the trial.

"This is really a first for Australia and certainly a first for NSW, too, to give people at risk an opportunity for screening or early detection before symptoms," she said.

"It's very important because most of the time if lung cancer is diagnosed once symptoms develop it's advanced beyond curative stage and at least three out of four of people are in that category when they're diagnosed."

She said it was "almost universal" that lung cancer is discovered by accident when patients are being tested for other health issues.

"Most of my early stage

lung cancer patients feel fine so they're shocked," she said.

People who are over 55 and generally in good health aside from smoking or recently smoking will be quizzed about their family history of cancer and the intensity of their cigarette habit to determine if they proceed to CT scans.

At least 80 per cent of people who are diagnosed with lung cancer have smoked.

"More men get prostate cancer than lung cancer but there are greater numbers of men who die from lung than

prostate," Dr Stone said. If the study saves lives, it's hoped early stage screening will be rolled out more widely and GPs will be educated on which patients to scan.

"Breast and bowel early screening have shown to be very effective and, those of us who work in lung cancer, we know that if you find it early you can cure it," Dr Stone said.

"People don't think to get scanned and there are no guidelines for GPs, specialists or patients at the moment to say who you should screen in

Australia so that's the other big point of this — finding out which group benefits the most from screening."

The program is also being run in Canada and may soon commence in Britain. Other hospitals taking part are the Prince Charles in Brisbane, Royal Melbourne and Epworth in Victoria and the St Charles Gairdner and Fiona Stanley hospitals in Western Australia.

NSW residents interested

in the trial should contact 02 9355 5689 or email svhs.cancerresearch@svha.org.au.