



Anaesthetists awarded key grant for pilot study into chronic pain after breast cancer surgery

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An innovative trial by Perth anaesthetists aimed at preventing chronic pain in breast cancer patients after their operation is about to get underway.

Four anaesthetists from Royal Perth Hospital (Dr Andrew Toner, Professor Tomas Corcoran, Professor Stephan Schug and Dr Martin Bailey) will be supported by a \$69,605 ANZCA Research Foundation grant for a pilot study to explore whether administering the commonly used local anaesthetic lidocaine by infusion into a patient's general circulation can prevent chronic pain in breast cancer patients after surgery.

One hundred and fifty patients from Royal Perth Hospital, Fiona Stanley Hospital and St John of God Subiaco will participate in the study.

An estimated 47 per cent of breast cancer patients experience some chronic pain after surgery. Half the patients in the "LOLIPOP" (Long term Outcomes after Lidocaine Infusions for Post-Operative Pain) study are being given an infusion of lidocaine before and during their operation and then for up to 12 hours after their operation. A placebo will be given to the other patients. All patients will then be monitored for six months to assess their chronic pain.

One of the study's investigators, consultant anaesthetist Dr Andrew Toner, said that chronic pain after operations has been under-recognised in anaesthesia and surgery care, and currently there are no proven drug therapies to prevent its occurrence.

Although lidocaine has long been used to numb particular parts of the body for procedures under local anaesthesia, anaesthetists have only recently started to infuse lidocaine into the general circulation of patients. This approach may stop the nervous system re-wiring that causes chronic pain.

If the pilot study finds that lidocaine infusions can be delivered effectively and simply, a much larger patient trial would then be developed to assess the drug's true value.

Dr Toner said it was fortunate that many WA hospitals are part of the ANZCA Clinical Trials Network, a leading organisation internationally for anaesthesia and pain medicine trials.

"Our experience shows that conducting a successful pilot study is essential to demonstrate that a larger trial is feasible. Although a large definitive trial has the potential to revolutionise practice with respect to the prevention of chronic post-surgical pain, such trials often return neutral results and it is important that practitioners maintain an open mind until appropriately designed studies are complete."