



March 31, 2015

Safety advice after paramedics called to 7411 falls a month

People with confusion including those suffering dementia and delirium due to illness are the focus of the 2015 April Falls Day theme: *Don't let confusion cloud the risk of falls.*

NSW Ambulance has joined the Clinical Excellence Commission in its annual campaign to halt the number of falls, particularly in seniors.

Michelle Shiel, NSW Ambulance Manager, Low Acuity Care, said falls constituted the most common medical response attended by paramedics.

Figures show paramedics responded to an average 7411 falls a month in 2013-14, the majority for people aged 65 years or older. Of 1,000,721 incidents in 2013-14, 88,937 involved falls (55,716 in the Sydney metropolitan area, 33,221 in regional NSW).

In the year to date, there have been 62,677 responses to falls, an increase of almost 4394 compared to the same period last year.

Lorraine Lovitt, Leader Falls Prevention Program, Clinical Excellence Commission, said people with confusion (memory or thinking problems) have an increased risk of falling and encouraged both family and carers to be on the lookout for an alteration in "usual" behaviour.

"This includes a sudden onset of confusion, disorientation, forgetfulness, inability to pay attention, restlessness and agitation," Ms Lovitt said.

"The person may have short term memory loss and hallucinations, be withdrawn, sleepy or unresponsive, or have changes in sleeping patterns, emotions and in their level of consciousness. This could be a sign that the person has a delirium which may be due to an infection, such as urinary tract.

"Family members and carers may be in a better position to notice these changes in behaviour and function and can bring it to the attention of a health care provider so the underlying cause can be identified and treated."

NSW Ambulance has been proactive in its approach to treating falls patients, particularly those aged 65 years and older.

Paramedics are trained to assist senior patients who have fallen but do not require emergency care. Once patients were assessed as not requiring ambulance transport, they were reviewed in their home for future risk of falls. Families and carers can inform the paramedic if they observe increasing levels of confusion.

Paramedics conduct a physical examination - including vision and mobility tests, together with a full medical history and social history to determine whether the person has a carer and support network.

"In some instances, the patients are then referred on to allied health professionals, such as occupational therapists who come in and assess the home for safety changes," Ms Shiel said.

Where the fall relates to an underlying health condition, recommendations and referrals are made for specialist treatment.

"A future aim is to conduct falls assessments on all patients aged more than 65 years. Our aim is pro-activity; identifying the risk before a fall occurs," Ms Shiel said.

Dr Sandy Muecke, Director of Research, says NSW Ambulance is involved in several research projects that aim to ensure that older patients with injuries from falls receive high quality out-of-hospital care.

Save Triple Zero (000) for saving lives



Dr Muecke said that, as part of a collaborative project with Neuroscience Research Australia (NeuRA), paramedics from seven ambulance stations in Sydney's south east referred 662 initially non-transported older falls patients to the NeuRA research team. About one third of the patients (222) consented to participate in the trial.

"The study is investigating whether a multifaceted falls risk assessment program compared to standard care reduces the number of subsequent falls. Data analysis for the six month follow-up period has begun and additional analyses will occur at 12 months," Dr Muecke said.

NSW Ambulance researchers are also assisting investigators at the George Institute for Global Health with an evaluation of the NSW Ministry of Health's *Stepping On* program.

"This initiative aims to reduce fall-related hospitalisations and ambulance re-attendances for older patients who have fallen," Dr Muecke said.

Things to consider to reduce the risk of a fall:

- Stand up slowly after lying down or sitting
- Take care when bending down and make sure you are steady before walking
- Don't wear poorly fitted slippers or walk in socks
- Keep floors free of clutter by removing unnecessary cords, cables and rugs and keeping walkways free
- Remember that dogs and cats like to be close, so check where your pet is located before you move.
- Talk to your GP if you are feeling drowsy, unsteady on your feet, dizzy or confused.

Media contacts:

Clinical Excellence Commission 0434 308 924

NSW Ambulance Media (02) 9320 7796

Save Triple Zero (000) for saving lives