

State-first therapeutic MND trial to get under way at Launceston General Hospital



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Local News



RESEARCH: Launceston General Hospital neurologist Dr Lauren Giles is leading the first multi-centre MND trial to be undertaken in Tasmania. Picture: Craig George

For the first time Northern Tasmanians living with motor neurone disease will be able to access a therapeutic trial, right on their doorstep.

In a state first the Launceston General Hospital is set to take part in an international multi-centre MND therapeutic trial exploring potential treatment options and ways to slow down the debilitating disease's progression.

With \$58,870 in funding from the Clifford Craig Foundation, the trial is being led by Dr Lauren Giles - one of [three neurologists now based at the LGH](#).

Previously, Tasmanian patients living with MND would need to travel interstate to access clinical trials.

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TEAM: Launceston neurologists Dr Aaron de Souza and Dr Lauren Giles, are leading the trial exploring treatment options for MND. Picture: Craig George

However as Dr Giles explained, one of the "silver linings" to come out of COVID-19 was a renewed push for accessing services closer to home.

"It was a little bit serendipitous ... due to COVID people weren't able to travel to be a part of these trials," she said.

"We had a couple of people with newly diagnosed MND here in Launceston last year who were very keen to be involved.

"This led to me getting in touch with some of the researchers in Victoria and saying - 'look, we think maybe we should be able to do this in Tassie, how would we go about starting up a trial site here'."

As a result the LGH neurology team including neurologists Dr Aaron de Souza and Dr Matt Lee-Archer were able to establish their own multidisciplinary MND clinic.

Along with providing patients with coordinated care options, the clinic is also equipped to host clinical trials - with the first to get underway in the coming months.

The trial will build on the positive results of the Lighthouse 1 trial, which suggested Triumeq - a medicine used to treat HIV infection - may be effective in slowing down the progression of MND.



Clifford Craig chief executive Peter Milne.

Given the findings of Lighthouse 1, conducted in Australia, Dr Giles said there was a renewed optimism that further research on a larger international scale could provide new insights into MND treatment options.

"It's really exciting, because motor neurone disease is a horrendous disease. It's something that's been around for a long time and there's really only one treatment that's licensed for slowing its progression, but it doesn't actually make a huge difference," she said.

"Looking at new treatment options is really the main area of hope, in what's otherwise a really difficult disease.

"Being involved in clinical trials is also a really positive thing for people and their families, living with this disorder. We don't know yet, there's no guarantee with it, but it's an avenue that may open up new treatment options."

The trial is being run at multiple international sites and in Australia will be coordinated by Macquarie University.

Operating as a randomised placebo-controlled trial, patients will be required to visit the Launceston MND clinic every three months. Here, two thirds will be given the active treatment, with the remainder to receive a placebo.

Working alongside co-researcher Dr de Souza as well as a team of allied health professionals, Dr Giles will then track the progress of each patient over a period of about two years.

Along with providing a foot in the door for the LGH to host further MND trials in the future, Dr Giles said she hoped the research would lead to a greater understanding of the disease - including steps towards a potential cure.

"The main thing we are hoping to see in this trial is that it delays the progression of the disease. If that's the case, that would be fantastic," she said.

"Because it's still the case that we don't really understand the underlying pathological mechanism of what is happening in MND.

"That's what we ultimately want to know - what sets this disease off. Is it a genetic thing, is it an environmental trigger, is it a combination of those things that start the process.

"Because once it's started, that's the problem - there is no way of slowing down the trajectory. But if we could understand it better, it would help us to potentially treat it earlier, and even look at ways of preventing it coming on."

Clifford Craig chief executive Peter Milne said the trial would not have been possible without the hospital's neurology department.

"For us, most importantly, it's exciting that we are actually able to support motor neurone disease research," he said.

"It is something our community has been asking for. A lot of people are affected by it here and there's some fairly famous cases in Launceston.

"So it's fantastic we can offer this in our own hospital, on the doorstep of patients and we are fortunate to have a neurology team that wants to do it."