



Head Over Heels

We all hear of hip fractures resulting from falls but what about brain injury? Nick Rushworth describes a growing and serious problem.

Secondly, even though injuries to the head due to a fall are consistently the second most common after hip fracture, head trauma in older people is often overlooked and the appropriate assessment and monitoring forgotten. Such care is vital since older people run a much greater risk of bleeding in the brain following head trauma. Add blood-thinning medications like warfarin to the mix and that risk increases dramatically.

Thirdly, rates of falls-related injuries to the head are rising while those for hip fracture are falling. No one's really sure why. But Brain Injury Australia conducted a comprehensive scan of the nation's falls prevention programs and brain injury/ head injury barely get a mention. Hip fracture – as a risk from falling – appears regularly.

Lastly – and maybe I'm being unfair to the nation's geriatricians – their stereotype of an older person who sustains a brain injury from a fall is someone demented – or dementing – in a nursing home. The prevailing attitude of some of them, "what's a little brain injury on top of their Alzheimer's?" is just not right, or fair. Facts are that while the rate of falls in residential aged care is much higher, most falls occur in the community, in the home. And what might be a "little" brain injury for an 18 year-old will be much more than that for someone in their 80s.

Brain Injury Australia's ambitions are always modest: the mere mention of brain injury alongside other injuries as a falls risk. Australia, like the rest of the developed world, is facing a "perfect storm" that will result in increasing rates of brain injury due to falls. It is the combined effect of government policies aimed at "active ageing" and "ageing in place" with increased life expectancy and better survival rates from injury due to improvements in hospital care. The United States' Centers for Disease Control has read the writing on the wall and is currently engaged in a nationwide awareness campaign targeting brain injury in "seniors". We should be doing the same here. Most falls are preventable as are the "secondary" brain injuries from bleeding on the brain. For instance, men and women can be convinced that climbing a ladder to clear gutters may not be as good an idea at age 85 as it was when they were 45. And our hospitals and nursing homes should be convinced to make "did you hit your head?" the first question asked of the fallen, from which all other assessment and management proceeds. ■

For more information, visit www.braininjuryaustralia.org.au or e-mail nick.rushworth@braininjuryaustralia.org.au

Nick Rushworth is executive officer of Brain Injury Australia

head trauma in older people is often overlooked and the appropriate assessment and monitoring forgotten.

While it might be common knowledge that falls are the leading cause of injury in Australia, perhaps it's less well-known that falls are now also the leading cause of traumatic brain injury – accounting for around 2 in every 5 admissions to hospital. This is not because more teenagers have decided to take drunken dives from balconies at 2 a.m. on a Saturday, but because of an ageing population. Almost three-and-a-half thousand older people were admitted for a brain injury from a fall during 2004-2005. Overall, brain injury is 10 times as common as spinal injury and produces, on average, 3 times the level of disability – because it is the brain that is injured.

And those who sustain a brain injury can experience a range of disabilities that will affect them not only physically but also in the way they think, feel and behave.

Brain Injury Australia's recent findings into fall-related injuries, presented to the federal government, are a revelation. Firstly, while it was no surprise that people aged 85 years and over – the fastest growing segment of Australia's population – have the highest rates of falls and falls injury, it was still shocking how high their death rates were. If you reach that age, fall over and land on your head, you are very likely to die.