

***Comment (February 2011)***

## ***High New Zealand Stroke Rate***

According to Prof. Valery Feigin and the ongoing ARCOS Study<sup>1</sup>, New Zealand has the second highest stroke rate among the developed (OECD) countries and Maori and Pacific people are strongly over-represented in these statistics.

Without wanting to over-simplify a complex subject, we know that up to 70% of strokes may be attributable to elevated blood pressure (risk starts increasing at systolic BP 115-120mmHg), and the cerebrovascular circulation is unquestionably the most blood pressure sensitive "target organ". I have no doubt that a good deal of the excess stroke risk in New Zealand is due to poor rates of blood pressure control, lack of specialist hypertension services, and a generally low level of expertise in hypertension management in the medical community generally. This is certainly exacerbated by the very high threshold for pharmacological treatment of high blood pressure advised in the NZ Cardiovascular Risk Guideline<sup>2</sup>.

I have laboured these issues in previous "Tips" and "Comments", but my message today is that stroke rate is a sensitive marker for effectiveness of hypertension control in a community. (In my view) we in New Zealand appear to be doing badly because hypertension is not currently regarded as a major public health issue, there is little public awareness of the problem, and hypertension is widely undertreated.

Trust me:- treat blood pressure effectively, and you will prevent strokes. Take a relaxed attitude to high blood pressure and you will be tripping over yourself trying to deal with the blood pressure after your patient has had a stroke or TIA.

1.<http://www.ctr.u.auckland.ac.nz/index.php/research-programmes/cardiovascular/154>

2.[New Zealand Cardiovascular Guidelines Handbook: - 2009 Edition](#) - March 2009