

New treatment 'zaps' high blood pressure

- Nick Miller
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MELBOURNE researchers have developed a new surgical technique that "zaps" nerves around the kidneys to dramatically reduce high blood pressure.

They say the technique could benefit more than a million Australians — and millions more around the world — at high risk of heart attack or stroke from high blood pressure that resists conventional drug treatments.

"(The problem is) pretty much a time bomb," said lead researcher Associate Professor Markus Schlaich, of the Baker IDI Institute.

"This resistant hypertension causes a dramatic increase in cardiovascular risks, and there's no other way we can help."

Around a third of adult Australians have elevated blood pressure, of whom one in six have a form that drug treatments either cannot fix or cause bad side effects.

The technique uses a catheter with a radio energy emitter on the end. It is inserted into an artery in the groin and travels up to the blood vessels around the kidney. There it "switches off" the nerves in the sympathetic nerve system involved in regulating blood pressure.

The researchers, led from the Baker IDI, Alfred hospital and Monash University, announced the results of the first trial of this technique at the American College of Cardiology Congress in Florida early this morning.

They reported that 50 patients with resistant hypertension were enrolled at five Australian and European centres. All showed "substantial and sustained" reductions in blood pressure, up to a year after the operation, with no side effects.

Professor Schlaich said the Baker was chosen by the manufacturer of the device to test the technique because it was a leader in the study of the sympathetic nerve system.

"We are very excited, because (the trial result) proves how important this nerve system is," he said.

The second person to undergo the treatment, Gael Lander, 66 of Brighton, said her high blood pressure had been a problem for 35 years.

"I had a feeling that someone was always pushing my 'fast forward' button," she said.

"I decided to try it (the therapy) on faith and trust, that I could have a fresh start."

The operation was in mid-2007. The effect on her blood pressure was immediate.

The technique is now undergoing a control trial to establish how it compares with drug therapy.



Gael Lander, who suffered from drug-resistant high blood pressure and had the new therapy in 2007, with Associate Professor Markus Schlaich of the Baker IDI Institute. Photo: Jason South