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Cancer fight a waiting game

Radiotherapy crisis hits patients

EXCLUSIVE

SUE DUNLEVY

ONE in three cancer patients are missing out on crucial radiotherapy and many of those who get it have to wait more than a month to begin treatment.

Senior radiologist and researcher Professor Michael Barton said many patients were missing out on the treatment because their doctors didn't tell them about it.

And he warned wait times would get worse unless new radiotherapy machines were provided to cope with the rising number of cancer cases.

"We need six new linear accelerators a year just to keep pace," he said.

Radiotherapy shrinks tumours before surgery and is used after surgery to stop the growth of any remaining cancer cells.

It is also used to relieve pain in patients with terminal cancer.

Half of all cancer patients could benefit from radiotherapy to cure their disease or relieve the pain of advanced cancer but only one in three are receiving it, says Professor Barton.

Prof Barton, who is working on breakthrough new MRI-guided radiotherapy technology at the Ingham Institute

for Applied Medical Research at Liverpool Hospital, was this week granted Research Australia's Health Services Research Awards.

He says lack of access to radiotherapy is a problem worldwide.

"If everyone got access we could save one million lives by 2035," he said.

A recent attempt by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare to measure wait-

ing times for radiotherapy in 2013-14 found more than half of those using radiotherapy to cure their cancer had to wait more than 18 days to get access to the treatment.

One in ten patients who used it to cure their cancer waited more than 35 days.

The AIHW found one in ten patients who needed emergency treatment — meant to begin within 24 hours — waited two days or longer.

Waiting times for emergency treatment were worst in NSW, where 12 per cent of patients were not treated within 24 hours.

Prof Barton says poor knowledge of the value of the treatment by doctors is also getting in the way of people accessing treatment.

"Some cancer patients just get the opinion of one specialist and they only get surgery rather than other treatment," he said.