

Water: free for some, not so for others

Everybody takes water for granted, however this is not the case for many people in our community.

It is estimated that approximately 1 in 20 people suffer from swallowing difficulties, with as many as 1 in every 2 elderly people living in residential care facilities being affected.

"Swallowing difficulties can lead to medical problems including dehydration, malnutrition, lung infections and can affect people's mood and compromise their quality of life," says Ms Leonie Chivers, Speech Pathologist at the Latrobe Regional Hospital.

Often Speech Pathologists recommend the use of thickened drinks to prevent any medical problems in people who have swallowing difficulties. However, this is not always well received by patients.

"Many of our patients refuse to drink thickened drinks because they are not appealing and do not quench their thirst. We can certainly understand where our patients are coming from and our aim is to find a happy medium," says Ms Martha Karagiannis, Speech Pathology Manager at Latrobe Regional Hospital.

A large-scale clinical trial for people with swallowing difficulties was conducted to investigate the effects of water in people with swallowing difficulties requiring thickened drinks and to look at quality of life.

"Our research showed that a large proportion of patients can have a drink of water under strict conditions only and that quality of life improved significantly," says Ms Martha Karagiannis.

"The results were clear cut immediately. Patients who were given access to water reported to be much happier and drank more fluids throughout the day," says Dr Tom Karagiannis, Senior Research Scientist with Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre.

The clinical trial is the largest of it's kind to be completed and the results provide further knowledge to clinical practice in the area of swallowing management.

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