Professor Galea awarded $4.7 million for spinal cord injury research

Austin Health researchers have been awarded more than $14 million from $19 million in grants available from the Victorian Neurotrauma Initiative for projects to improve the quality of life of people with spinal cord injuries (SCI).

Director of the Rehabilitation Sciences Research Centre, Professor Mary Galea was awarded $4.7 million for a five-year, four-part study to investigate exercise in people with SCI, including the potential to recover neurological function.

“The current approach is that damage to the spinal cord will never recover so you should maximise what you can do with the rest of your body. But people receive much better emergency and intensive care treatment these days and a lot more people have incomplete injuries so there is some continuity of the spinal cord,” Professor Galea said.

Part of the project will use electrical stimulation on patients’ muscles to drive the cycling of a bike, while in treadmill training, patients will use their body to adjust when a therapist moves their legs beneath them in a walking pattern. “The exercise will drive whatever potential the body has to repair,” Professor Galea said.

Her study will also look at making gyms more accessible for people with SCIs - including an education program for fitness instructors, study the use of electrical stimulation to improve hand function in tetraplegics and look at how early patients can start exercise.

“It’s a wonderful opportunity for the spinal unit to have such an injection of funding – cellular research has always been much more popular than therapy research. There are a lot of synergies between the projects so we plan to work collaboratively,” Professor Galea said.

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