A leader in acute stroke care

Associate Professor Bruce Campbell picked neurology over haematology because it seemed a “riskier” thing to do

As he neared the completion of his Bachelor of Medical Science at the University of Melbourne in 1999, Bruce Campbell had his sights set on being a research scientist.

At the time, he was focused on research into dementia, which may have been a clue as to his future direction.

“I had some very good mentors who suggested that I become a research scientist via medicine, because it would give me a clinical perspective to frame research questions,” Associate Professor Campbell tells the MJA.

It was good advice, as it turned out.

Today, at 40, Associate Professor Campbell is a consultant neurologist and Head of Hyperacute Stroke at the Royal Melbourne Hospital and a principal research fellow at the University of Melbourne’s Melbourne Brain Centre. He is chair of the Clinical Council of the Stroke Foundation and has just completed co-chairing the 2017 update of the NHMRC-approved Australian stroke guidelines, to be launched by the federal Health Minister on 4 September 2017. He has been an inaugural member of the Victorian stroke telemedicine project and is the co-ordinator of the National Brain School training program for neurologists in training. He is a member of the World Stroke Organization Guidelines Committee and Young Stroke Professionals Committee.

Two years ago, a trial of which he was co-principal investigator and medical co-ordinator was published in the New England Journal of Medicine and, with four other international trials, quietly caused a revolution in the world of acute stroke care. The EXTEND-IA trial was a multi-centre randomised trial of endovascular clot retrieval following standard intravenous thrombolysis in acute ischemic stroke, and has been described as “transformative”.

Today his research is focused on getting blocked brain arteries open even faster, and he is part of a team creating Australia’s first “mobile stroke unit”, which will be sent out alongside a standard ambulance crew on 000 calls for suspected stroke cases.

“We do a CT scan of a patient’s brain outside their front door, and administer clot-busting drugs right there,” he says. “Every minute counts, because brain cells are dying at an alarming rate.”

And to think, in the last 2 weeks of his medical training, Associate Professor Campbell almost decided to become a haematologist.

“I was pretty comfortable with haematology,” he says. “I liked it, I understood it. But neurology seemed like the higher risk option, the unknown frontier, I guess, so I decided to try it.

“I knew that if I didn’t like it I could always step back from it and head in another direction.”

Towards the end of his advanced training in neurology he found himself leaning towards stroke as a focus point.

“Every second counts,” Associate Professor Campbell says. “We need patients and their families to recognise stroke and act immediately to give these effective treatments the best chance of reducing disability.”

The Stroke Foundation can be found online at https://strokefoundation.org.au/