Pilot launch to keep newborns in check

Type 1 diabetes screening

BY EVA KOLIMAR

ONE of the first newborn screening pilot programs for type 1 diabetes has been launched at St George Hospital.

The Type 1 Diabetes National Screening Pilot, funded by JDRF and led by a University of Sydney team, identifies children at risk of developing type 1 diabetes.

Parents of babies will be offered a simple heel prick test, done when the usual newborn bloodspot test is collected.

Experts say the challenge with type 1 diabetes is that it can be difficult to identify, often with symptoms being mistaken for other conditions.

Kirstine Bell from the university's Charles Perkins Centre, has been the lead researcher of the pilot since it started in 2020. With St George being the first hospital to offer the test, the goal is to expand, and become part of the national newborn screening program.

"The program has gone through a long development phase and we're excited to be launching at St George," Dr Bell said. "It's a common misconception that type 1 diabetes is an autoimmune condition, but we know that with nine out of 10 babies, there's no family history. For those families, it really comes out of the blue. When symptoms, such as thirst, tiredness, irritability, start appearing, they can escalate quickly, and by then a lot of damage has been done. We can completely avoid that just by screening."

The Menai mother's newborn, Harry, was the first baby at St George to have the test.

"I jumped at the chance to have my bub screened," Dr Bell said. "There's no extra prick for the baby and its reassuring."

Associate Professor Amanda Henry, an obstetrician at St George Hospital, said the free test gave parents the advantage of early detection.

"Early signs of type 1 diabetes are often vague and can be missed or confused with other minor childhood concerns," she said.

"As a result, at least one in three Australian children with type 1 diabetes are not diagnosed until they require emergency medical care."

"Screening at birth has been shown to support earlier diagnosis before the child becomes seriously unwell."

"While there is no cure yet for the disease, early detection can prevent serious health problems and support a better prognosis and long-term management of the condition."

For the majority of babies, early screening will show a low chance of developing the condition.

Children who are identified as having an increased risk will be notified and invited for regular follow up testing to monitor for very early signs of the condition.
St George Hospital launches new screen test for bubs.

Kirstine Bell's son Harry was the first baby to have a Type 1 diabetes test done at St George Hospital. Dr Bell led the development of a screening program. Picture supplied