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New medical retrieval service for critically ill patients

The NSW Government has announced funding of almost a million dollars for a new service aimed at saving the lives of critically ill patients, including those with swine flu who are suffering severe respiratory problems.

Minister for Health, John Della Bosca, said the Extra-Corporeal Membrane Oxygenation (ECMO) Medical Retrieval Service despatches teams of anaesthetists, surgeons and intensive care nursing and medical staff direct to patients anywhere in the state.

“These teams take ECMO machines to the patient and transport them to a major hospital for intensive care treatment,” the Minister said.

“The ECMO machines continuously pump blood from a patient through a membrane oxygenator, which removes carbon dioxide and adds oxygen thereby supporting the patient’s heart and lungs, while treatment for underlying illness takes place.

“ECMO is commonly used at all our 10 major teaching hospitals for people with heart failure prior to or following cardiac operations, or those awaiting a heart/lung transplant.

“But now they are also being used for critically ill swine flu patients suffering underlying conditions such as asthma, obesity, chronic lung disease and diabetes.

“The lungs of some swine flu patients cannot oxygenate their blood and these ECMO machines have been found to be effective,” the Minister said.

“There are currently 41 ECMO machines in the NSW Public Hospital network, 25 are cardiac-specific and there are 16 for intensive care patients with respiratory problems.

“Clinical experts have advised of a recent increase in the number of patients on ECMO, who require stabilisation and transport to specialist centres, due to severe respiratory illness.

“As a result, NSW Health has ordered another five machines.

“The new ECMO Medical Retrieval Service operates through a collaboration between Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, St Vincent’s Hospital and the NSW Ambulance Service, and is funded by the NSW Government at a cost of \$960,000,” the Minister said.

“An additional \$100,000 has been allocated to modify the NSW Ambulance helicopters and refit special ambulances to transport these patients and medical teams.

“This new service is part of the NSW Government’s commitment to ensuring people throughout the state have access to the latest in health technology and expertise when they need it most,” the Minister added.