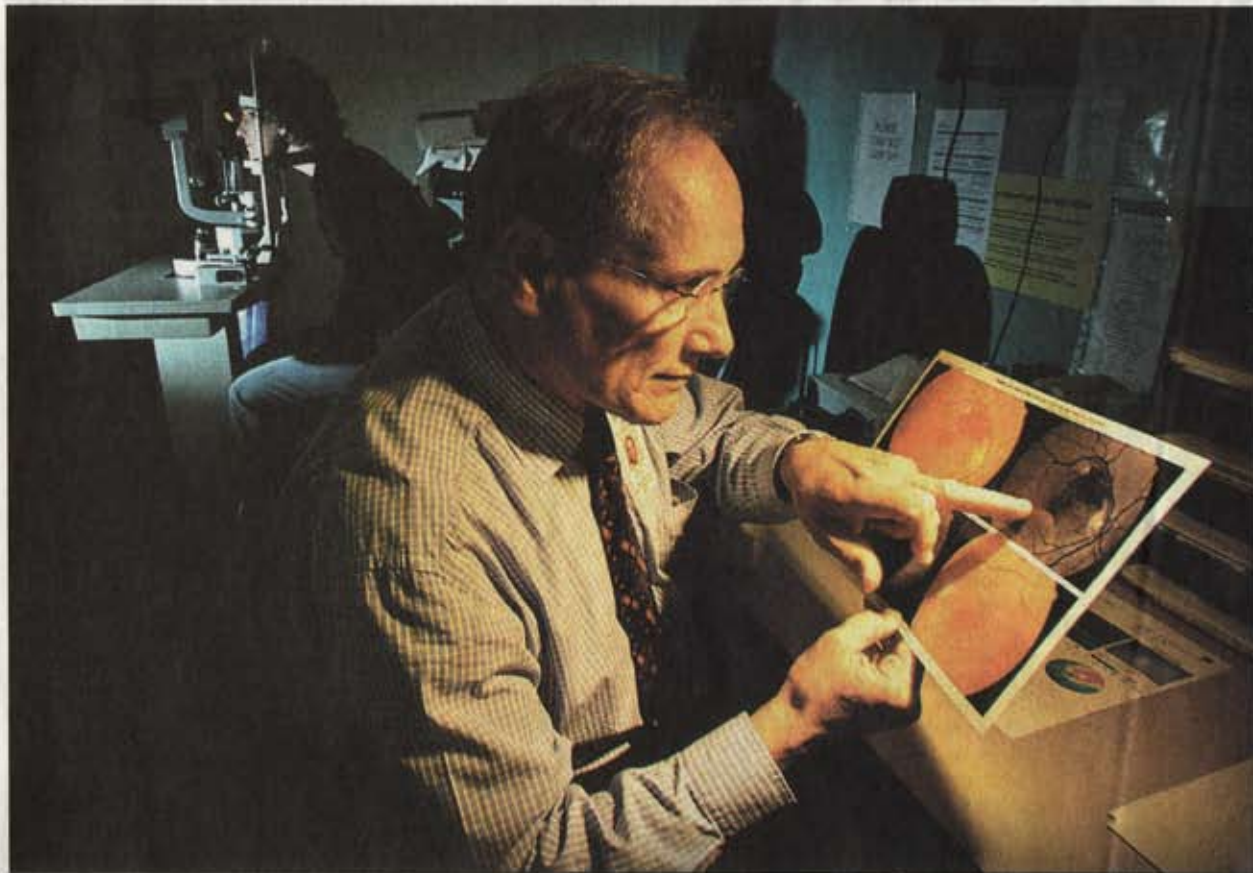


Eye test looks to predict future stroke victims



Searching for signs: Professor Paul Mitchell looks at retinal images at Sydney's Westmead Hospital

Picture: Lindsay Moller

Clara Pirani
Medical reporter

A SIMPLE eye test could predict who is likely to have a stroke in the next seven years.

A study of more than 3600 people over the age of 50 found those with a condition called retinopathy, or lesions of the retina, were three times more likely to suffer a stroke, even if they displayed no other risk factors.

Paul Mitchell, director of the Centre for Vision Research at Westmead Millennium Institute, said about 10 per cent of people over 50 had retinopathy, diagnosed by taking high-resolution photographs of the retina.

"This test is a marker for stroke even for people who don't have other stroke risk factors like high blood pressure. Usually about 2 per cent of people above the age of 50 will have a stroke, but we found about 5 to 6 per cent of people who had retinal lesions had a stroke within six or seven years."

Professor Mitchell said damage to the retina indicated vascular problems such as narrowing of the arteries.

"The eye and the brain circulation are essentially identical, so by taking an image of the retina

we are seeing a snapshot of what might be happening in the brain." He said the images would have to be taken by an eye specialist, rather than a GP.

Stroke is the third-largest cause of death in Australia after heart disease and cancer.

National Stroke Foundation chief executive Erin Lalor said: "About 48,000 people a year have a stroke, and within a year of having a stroke about a third of the people will die, about a third will make a complete recovery and about a third of the people will have some disability.

"Any new advances in stroke prevention are encouraging."

The findings will be published in the journal *Neurology*.

Professor Mitchell said further research involving 2000 stroke patients in Sydney and Melbourne had begun to determine whether retinopathy was a predictor of certain types of stroke.

"We are now continuing to work to explore the relevance of this work and to see how it can play a specific practical role in the future," he said.

"We're recruiting about 2000 people in Sydney and Melbourne who have had a stroke to look at how common these retinal signs are, and whether they are helpful in predicting the type of stroke."