

MRI predicts risks for premature babies

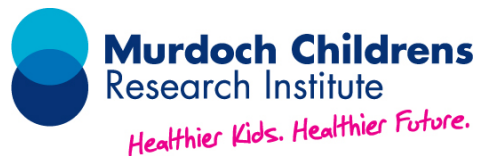
A new international study has revealed that imaging the brains of premature babies' provides doctors with vital clues as to how those babies will develop as children.

Researchers at Melbourne's Murdoch Childrens Research Institute and the Royal Women's Hospital, in collaboration with New Zealand researchers, studied the brains of 167 very premature babies shortly after birth, using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). Their progress was then assessed at age two, when they were tested for early intellectual and motor development.

Consistent with previous research, a large proportion of these children were experiencing developmental delay at age 2. This study found that brain abnormalities seen shortly after birth strongly predicted developmental problems at age two. These brain abnormalities better predict developmental problems than current methods used to identify high risk children, such as brain ultrasound.

Researcher Dr Peter Anderson says "This highlights the potential benefits of scanning very premature babies. It would improve our ability to identify children at risk for development delay, which is important for helping these families and enrolling the child in appropriate early intervention programs."

Currently in Australia, it is not routine practise for premature babies to undergo brain MRI scans.



“With more than 3,500 premature babies born in Australia each year, it has become really important that we understand how these kids will grow up,” Dr Anderson says.

The results of the study were published this month in *New England Journal of Medicine*. The researchers hope to expand the study and follow the development of these premature children at six years of age.

The Children’s MRI Centre, a joint initiative of Murdoch Childrens Research Institute and The Royal Children’s Hospital has the only 3T (high resolution) MRI scanner in Australia for children.

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