HEART RHYTHM CONGRESS DEBATES NEED FOR SCREENING OF UNKNOWN OR UNDIAGNOSED ATRIAL FIBRILLATION (AF)

“9% OF ALL ISCHAEMIC STROKES CAUSED BY UNKNOWN AF”

Thursday 13 October, Heart Rhythm Congress, Birmingham, UK: Many of the world’s leading authorities on the management and treatment of atrial fibrillation (AF) met at the Heart Rhythm Congress to debate the latest evidence supporting the value of screening for people with unknown AF.

Professor Ben Freedman OAM, Heart Research Institute, University of Sydney, Australia, presented the latest evidence to the Congress, “Recent studies have shown that in 9% of all ischaemic strokes, AF is only detected after the stroke has occurred. AF is often asymptomatic, and therefore unknown in a large proportion of people who have it. If we could detect AF before stroke occurs by screening, and give anti-clotting medication, many strokes could be prevented.”

AF is the most common heart rhythm abnormality, and is associated with a third of all ischemic strokes, which are typically more severe and debilitating for the patient. Data from stroke registries show that both unknown and untreated or under treated AF is responsible for most of these strokes. The tragedy is that most could be prevented if efforts were directed towards detection of AF before stroke occurs, through screening or case finding, and the provision of oral anticoagulant medications to prevent clots being formed in the heart, dislodging to be carried to an artery of the brain, blocking the circulation and causing an AF-related stroke.

“From our studies using a single time point we identified that 1.4% of people over the age of 65 have unknown AF, and that if left untreated, these patients, believed to have ‘benign’ AF, have an annual risk of stroke between 3-4%. We believe that this data added to the knowledge from a number of international registries combined with studies on community-based screening reinforce the need for the screening of people over 65 years of age to detect unknown AF “, continued Professor Freedman.

Trudie Lobban MBE, CEO & Founder Arrhythmia Alliance, added, “In the UK, we know that there are over half a million people with undiagnosed AF, who are at risk of suffering a debilitating AF-related stroke. Arrhythmia Alliance, together with AF Association and the All Party Parliamentary Group on AF, are urging the UK National Screening Committee to reconsider its decision from 2014 to not approve a screening programme for AF. We welcome the excellent work being driven by Professor Freedman to provide the evidence-base needed to convince authorities, such as the National
Screening Committee, of the unquestionable value of national screening programmes to identify unknown AF in people over 65 years of age.”

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Notes to editors

1. **To arrange an interview** with Professor Freedman and / or Trudie Lobban on the need for screening for unknown AF:
   
nigel@heartrhythmalliance.org or on 07785 277343

2. Arrhythmia Alliance, are global advocates, working in partnership to reduce deaths and impact on individuals caused by cardiac arrhythmias and their associated morbidities. By raising awareness and campaigning for the improved detection and care of heart rhythm disorders, Arrhythmia Alliance aims to extend and improve the lives of the millions around the world that these conditions affect. Visit website [www.heartrhythmalliance.org](http://www.heartrhythmalliance.org)

3. Professor Ben Freedman OAM is Deputy Director Cardiovascular Strategy, Heart Research Institute and Charles Perkins Centre, Sydney, and Professor of Cardiology at the University of Sydney. His research interests now focus on stroke prevention in atrial fibrillation: his group’s work on screening was nominated as a finalist in the Australian Innovation award in 2013. He formed the AF-SCREEN International Collaboration which now has over 100 members from 30 countries, including many of the foremost names in AF research. In 2011 he was awarded the Order of Australia Medal for service to medicine as a clinician, educator and researcher.