

Heart attack or indigestion? Fast-tracking finding out

The National Heart Foundation's 2015 Heart Week is less about promoting awareness of heart-attack warning signs and more about the risks of general slothfulness in this multi-screen-tethered age. All the same, as the campaign encourages people to focus on their tickers, it's possible that even more of them will be showing up in a hospital emergency department with chest pain, a presenting symptom that tends to put patients fairly high on the triage list.

About 500,000 Australians check into hospital EDs each year with chest pain, making up some 8% of all emergency visits. “Only about 15% of them will have a heart-disease cause for their chest pain,” “Due to the similarity of symptoms of heart disease with other non-life threatening conditions doctors find it difficult to identify who does and who doesn't have heart disease, and that's why we've had these lengthy assessment processes,” explains Cullen. “We want to continue the safety of these processes, but do it in a timeframe that's more reasonable.”

Cullen decided that the long-held cardiac diagnosis protocols could do with some interrogating: she and her collaborators wanted to look at the costs, risks and benefits around chest-pain diagnosis in emergency departments, and discover if there was a way to make the whole process faster, without compromising care.

Cullen's objective to quickly sort cardiac-related chest pain from non-serious chest pain doesn't mean she is at all dismissive of the symptom. “I don't want to discourage anyone from coming to the hospital, or to get them to try to triage themselves at home,” she says. “Chest pain is one of the most anxiety-provoking symptoms for adults. I always feel for patients who say, ‘I'm wasting your time, it's probably nothing.’ Heart disease is still the leading killer in Australia, and if it takes *us* a long time to work out if a patient does or doesn't have heart disease, there's no way a patient could or should be making that assessment based on Dr Google. They're *not* wasting our time.”