



Why elderly have an expensive drug problem

By health writer
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ELDERLY people are falling over and breaking bones because they take too many drugs, new research reveals.

As many as 40 per cent of pensioners have "polypharmacy" problems, meaning they take five or more different types of medications at once.

This triggers complications such as dizziness, confusion, depression, weakness and anorexia.

The new research, conducted at Concord and Fairfield hospitals in Sydney, found pensioners who take multiple medications are twice as likely to fall as the rest of the aged population.

Some hoard and take "shoe boxes overflowing with medica-

tions", researchers said.

Falls — often resulting in dislocated and broken bones — are the biggest injury-related drain on the health system at \$324 million per year in NSW.

David Le Couteur, professor of geriatric medicine at Concord Hospital, said many patients did not need to take so many drugs and could safely withdraw or reduce their dosage.

Health Minister Reba Meagher said limiting the amount of drugs taken by older people could cut hospital admissions and the average length of stays.

Professor Le Couteur said elderly people take an average of five different medications — or

10 if they live in nursing homes.

"There is no evidence that drugs piled together work but there is evidence that it could be doing them harm," he said.

"The problem with polypharmacy is just a reflection that we don't know what we are doing with [the aging population].

"But often doctors have concerns about the medico-legal consequences of not prescribing."

Robert Simpson, 85, has been taking 22 tablets per day to treat various ailments, including Parkinson's disease, a stroke, inflammation and artery problems. "He has got a lot of things wrong with him," his wife Doone said.



Cocktail: Mr Simpson's medication



Health issues: Robert Simpson