



Premature babies get warm imaging

Premature babies can now be MRI scanned thanks to a new incubator

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HEALTH EDITOR

BETTER treatments to help premature babies cope with the dangerous early weeks of life will soon be on the way with the commissioning of Australia's first incubator suitable for use in a magnetic resonance imaging machine.

Researchers in Queensland say the \$1 million device will allow them to quadruple the number of babies they put through MRI machines, which allow doctors to take cross-sectional images of the body and see detail invisible on X-ray or ultrasound scans.

The advance will be used to help diagnose more accurately problems in acutely ill babies, and conduct research to find out which approaches to treating premature babies work best.

MRI machines are designed for adults, and the technology has been little used for babies, particularly premature babies, because

they need so much support, such as warmth and often fluids and monitoring. The new MRI incubator will allow babies to be placed inside and the entire unit loaded into the machine's doughnut-like hole where the scans are done.

Paul Colditz, director of the Perinatal Research Unit at the University of Queensland's Centre for Clinical Research, who will lead the research team using the incubator, said the bulk of the \$1m cost was accounted for by the three infant-sized coils that are used during the imaging process.

The rest of the cost was related to the reformulation of metal components including leads, fittings and even oxygen cylinders using non-magnetic materials, to avoid being damaged by the MRI machine's powerful magnet.

"We will be the first group in Australia able to conduct imaging of preterm babies, and this oppor-

tunity has the potential to break down the current boundaries of brain impairment treatment and produce huge gains for babies and their families," he said.

The incubator has been bought by the University of Queensland, the Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital and the city's Royal Children's Hospital.

One-month-old Jasper Hyde nearly became the second baby to be scanned in the new incubator since its commissioning last week, after he developed a build-up of fluid in his brain that could have forced doctors to insert a tube deep into his head to drain it off.

But at the 11th hour, the blockage in Jasper's brain corrected itself and the swelling began to subside. Jasper's mother, Sara Hyde, 24, from Bundaberg, said it had been reassuring to know that an MRI scan was available.



LYNDON MECHIELSON

Paul Colditz at the Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital with a new incubator that can be loaded directly into an MRI machine with a baby inside