

Hospital drug ruined balance and hearing

By MATTHEW KELLY

A CENTRAL Coast woman who won damages against NSW Health for debilitating injuries suffered from Gentamicin has called for the widely used antibiotic to be banned.

Angela Bown-Hayes is one of a handful of people in Australia to be compensated for vestibular injuries caused by Gentamicin.

Her case resembles three others being pursued by a Newcastle health law firm.

Ms Bown-Hayes was given the drug intravenously at Gosford Hospital in 2004 to treat a suspected burst cyst on her kidney. Within days she began experiencing difficulties with balance.

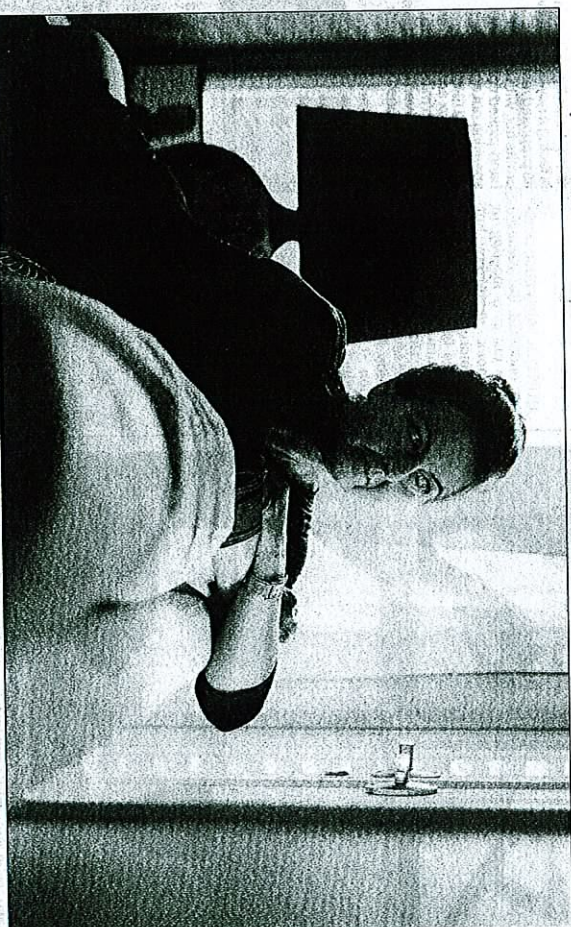
"Even when I was walking out of hospital I felt very shaky and wobbly, but I put it down to being in bed for so long and not eating," she said. Her condition continued to deteriorate, resulting in her having to hold the wall for support when moving about.

A neurologist immediately suspected that Gentamicin, used since the 1960s, had damaged her middle ear.

The first thing he asked was, were you given Gentamicin in hospital," she said. Tests confirmed she had suffered 97 per cent damage in her middle ear and lost 25 per cent of her hearing.

Mrs Bown-Hayes was forced into a drawn-out legal battle for compensation, finally settled through mediation.

A former small-business operator, she now regularly uses a cane for balance and often suffers nausea. "Everything wobbles. Even



HEARTBROKEN: Angela Bown-Hayes is calling for the antibiotic Gentamicin to be banned.

-Picture by Peter Stoop

when I'm sitting down I've got movement in my eyes. It's not visibly clear," she said.

"People look at you when you start to wobble and they must be thinking She's either drunk or on drugs, and that's really embarrassing."

Newcastle-based medical litigation lawyer Catherine Henry, who represented Ms Bown-Hayes, said safer alternatives to Gentamicin existed.

"Lawyers like myself, who have run these cases, have questioned why the drug continues to be used to the levels

that it is in Australian hospitals," Ms Henry said.

A Department of Health spokeswoman said the benefits and potential side effects of Gentamicin were known and considered by clinicians before prescribing.

Gentamicin is one of a range of antibiotics used to treat infections. It may be the best choice of antibiotic based on the condition of the patient and the likelihood of success in treating the particular infection.

WHAT IS GENTAMICIN

- It is a bactericidal antibiotic that has been widely used in hospitals since the 1960s.
- It is administered intravenously, intramuscularly or topically to treat a range of infections.
- It is a vestibulotoxic, which can damage the middle inner ear if taken at high doses or for prolonged periods. For this reason, Gentamicin is usually dosed by body weight.
- Psychiatric symptoms can also occur including anxiety, confusion and visual hallucination.
- Although safer antibiotics have since been developed, Gentamicin's continued use is explained by its relatively low cost and effectiveness.