Information for patients from JNNP

Study finds who benefits most from stroke unit care

Younger people, patients who have had a certain type of stroke and people who lost consciousness after having a stroke should all be given priority for treatment at specialist stroke units, researchers say. These groups all benefit a lot from receiving specialist treatment, improving their chances of surviving their stroke and being able to live independently afterwards.

What do we know already?

People who've had a stroke, who are treated in specialist stroke units, live longer and have fewer disabilities than people treated in hospital outside a stroke unit. Doctors have known this for some time, and more than 9 in 10 hospitals in England now have specialist stroke units. Guidelines for doctors say that people admitted to hospital with suspected strokes should be treated in specialist units wherever possible. However, this doesn't always happen. A small number of hospitals still don't have stroke units, and those that do may have only a limited number of beds. So stroke patients are still treated elsewhere in hospital. In 2006, only 63 percent of stroke patients in England were treated in stroke units. Doctors want to know which stroke patients get the most benefit from specialist units, so they can decide who gets priority when there is limited space. This new study from Sweden looked at the records of more than 100,000 stroke patients, to try to pinpoint who benefits most.

What does the new study say?

The study identified three main groups of people who had a big improvement in their chances of surviving and remaining independent, if they were treated in a stroke unit.

- Younger people (aged under 65): researchers found that 11 in 100 people under 65 had died or were unable to live independently, three months after stroke unit care, compared with 22 in 100 younger people who were treated in other hospital wards.
- People who had a stroke caused by bleeding in the brain (a haemorrhagic stroke), not a blood clot in the brain (an ischaemic stroke): researchers found that 41 in 100 people with a haemorrhagic stroke had died or were unable to live independently after stroke unit care.
care, compared with 60 in 100 people with haemorrhagic stroke who were treated in other hospital wards.

- People who were unconscious when they arrived at the hospital: researchers found that 83 in 100 people who'd been unconscious on arrival had died or were unable to live independently after stroke unit care, compared with 91 in 100 unconscious people who were treated in other hospital wards.

This doesn't mean that other people didn't benefit. Every group the researchers looked at did better if they were in a stroke unit. But the stroke unit made the most difference for people in these three groups.

**How reliable are the findings?**

This was a big study, with good-quality data. Because of the type of study, we can't rule out the chance that other factors (apart from where they were treated) might have had an effect on how well people did. For example, it could be that people with a better chance of survival were taken to stroke units. But the researchers say they took this into account when they did their calculations.

**Where does the study come from?**

The study was carried out by researchers from a number of universities in Sweden, using data from the Swedish Stroke Register:

**What does this mean for me?**

Because it comes from Sweden, it's hard to know whether these results are directly relevant to people in the UK. Stroke treatment in Sweden might vary from treatment in the other countries, so we can't be sure that the results translate to other countries.

If you've had a stroke, you probably don't have much say in where you are treated, especially at first. However, it's important that people know it's better to be treated in a stroke unit. Some ambulances are now told to bypass the local hospital if it doesn't have a stroke unit, and to take people straight to the nearest hospital that does have a stroke unit. Knowing that it's best to be in a stroke unit might reassure you, if you're worried that you are not going to your local hospital.

**What should I do now?**

If you have a family member or someone close being treated for stroke, ask whether they are receiving treatment in a stroke unit. If not, ask if it's possible for them to be moved to a stroke unit.

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