Backgrounder: Stroke Unit Care Improves Outcomes

Rationale:
Stroke units facilitate quality, cost-effective and efficient care as well as improve patient and system outcomes. Patients who receive stroke unit care are more likely to survive, return home, and regain independence as compared to those who receive less organized conventional care.1

Strong evidence indicates that stroke unit care:
- reduces death and disability in all stroke patients by as much as 30%
- results in shorter lengths of hospital stay
- is cost effective
- reduces the likelihood of requiring long term care

A stroke unit is defined as a specialized, geographically defined hospital unit dedicated to the management of stroke patients and staffed by an interprofessional stroke team with a specialized interest in stroke care.1,2

Admission to a stroke unit facilitates quality stroke care demonstrated by early prevention, recognition and management of post-stroke complications (e.g., pneumonia, urinary tract infections, venous thromboembolism, pain, progressing stroke, falls and pressure sores); monitoring and early treatment of hypoxia, blood glucose abnormalities, fever and dehydration; early assessment of neurological impairment; early and comprehensive diagnostic testing; early screening and management of dysphagia; early mobilization; early identification of rehabilitation needs and functional goals; early discharge planning and patient and caregiver education/training.1

The team should consist of healthcare professionals including physicians, nursing, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, speech-language pathology, social work, and clinical nutrition (dietitian).2 Members should also include: pharmacists, discharge planners or case managers, (neuro) psychologists, palliative care specialists, recreation and vocational therapists, spiritual care providers, peer supporters and stroke recovery group liaisons.2

Members of the interprofessional team collaborate, communicate and work together along collegial lines to improve stroke care. Stroke unit care should include daily or biweekly patient care rounds with the interprofessional stroke team to conduct case reviews, discuss patient management issues, family concerns or needs, and discharge planning.2 Staff has access to regular professional development related to stroke care and prevention.1

Early access to a stroke unit is an effective, proactive approach that saves lives and improves outcomes.

Best practice recommends that all patients admitted to hospital with stroke or TIA should be cared for on a stroke unit.
Challenges:

Not all patients have equal access to stroke unit care. In 2010-2011, only 38.3% of stroke or TIA patients were treated on an acute stroke unit at any time during their inpatient stay. The Ontario Stroke Network’s goal is to double the rate of stroke unit utilization by 2016 and work is ongoing towards achieving the provincial benchmark of 87.5%. A collaborative, organized, regional approach among hospitals to cluster patients with stroke at designated sites is needed to achieve these targets. The critical mass of ischemic stroke patients is an important consideration. According to the Quality-Based Procedures: Clinical Handbook for Stroke released in January 2013 by the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care (MOHLTC) “to optimize outcomes and efficiencies, stroke volumes should be at least 165 ischemic stroke patients per year per organization.” Higher stroke volumes have been found to be associated with lower stroke mortality, as well as higher quality of early stroke care and reduced hospital bed-day use.

Opportunity for change:

The MOHLTC states that “Quality-Based Procedures (QBPs) are an integral part of Ontario’s Health System Funding Reform (HSFR) and a key component of Patient-Based Funding. HSFR has been identified as an important mechanism to strengthen the link between the delivery of high quality care and fiscal sustainability. An important recommendation in the QBPs: Clinical Handbook for Stroke specifically states: “patients should be admitted to a specialized, geographically defined hospital unit dedicated to the management of stroke patients.”

For more information, please contact the:
Regional Director, Stroke Network of SEO at 613-549-6666 x3562 or martinc@kgh.kari.net
Or the Ontario Stroke Network at 416-489-7111, www.ontariostrokenetwork.ca or info@ontariostrokenetwork.ca

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