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First stroke rehabilitation audit finds lack of staff and specialists

The first ever audit of Australian stroke rehabilitation services has found that many hospital based rehabilitation units are not led by physicians with specialist training in rehabilitation and staffing levels are lower than recommended.

The **National Stroke Audit Post Acute Services** was conducted by the National Stroke Foundation to gain insight into the current state of stroke rehabilitation, and whether services are implementing evidence-based processes of care recommended in the *Clinical Guidelines for Stroke Rehabilitation and Recovery*.

The audit of 97 rehabilitation units found 65 per cent of rural units were led by general practitioners or physicians whereas 73 per cent of urban units had specialist rehabilitation physicians in charge.

Staff at just over half of the rehabilitation units audited had access to continuing education in stroke management while only a quarter of rural units had stroke education programs onsite.

“Stroke rehabilitation units need leadership from specialists trained in rehabilitation and adequate resources to deliver evidence-based care and ensure appropriate secondary prevention for stroke patients,” said Dr Michael Pollack, Director of Hunter Stroke Service who was Chair of the audit’s National Advisory Committee. “Appropriate leadership and staffing would also facilitate access to stroke care education for staff and important research activities.”

As part of the audit, 68 rehabilitation units also elected to complete a retrospective case note review. Dr Erin Lalor, Chief Executive Officer of the National Stroke Foundation said the audit showed that while overall outcomes for stroke patients were good, there is still room for improvement in secondary prevention.

“At the time of discharge one in five stroke rehabilitation patients did not have medication for high blood pressure - a major risk factor for stroke - and more than half had not been given lifestyle advice to help prevent further strokes,” Dr Lalor said.

The audit found less than half of patients were informed about self-management programs and only a third about peer support. Professional advice for dealing with sexual issues after stroke was only offered to 13 per cent of patients and less than 60 per cent were provided with a point of contact for issues arising post discharge.

“Last year the National Stroke Foundation released a report called *Walk in our shoes* which provided an overview of stroke support in Australia,” said Dr Lalor. “Stroke survivors told us in the report that ongoing support is integral to their quality of life, their families and carers.”

The audit showed that for every research program specific to stroke rehabilitation there were three research programs for acute stroke intervention and prevention.

The National Stroke Foundation acknowledged the help and support of the National Advisory Committee which included representatives from all areas of post acute stroke care.

Interviews available with Dr Erin Lalor and Dr Michael Pollack. Media contact: Kellie Furey, National Stroke Foundation, 03 9670 1000