



Discussing Sexual Wellbeing with Stroke Patients: Healthcare Professionals' Views

Background:

- Stroke is a common cause of ill health. One effect of stroke sometimes overlooked is the impact on the sex lives of stroke survivors and their partners.
- Stroke is frequently linked to a reduction in sex drive, physical changes and disability. In addition, the resultant change in lifestyle for stroke survivors can influence sexual satisfaction and expectations.
- The Department of Health's UK National Stroke Strategy states patients need access to emotional support services (including supporting sexual wellbeing)
- We wanted to find out whether sex was a 'taboo' subject for staff caring for stroke patients and if so, why this is so.

Health Care Professionals' Views on Discussing Sexual Wellbeing with patients who have had a Stroke: A Qualitative Study

Findings

- Using in-depth interviews with health care professionals (HCPs), researchers found that sexual wellbeing was a topic HCPs did not raise with patients and was infrequently raised by patients.
- Barriers to starting a discussion with patients fell into four main areas:
 - At an organisational level, sexual wellbeing was not seen as part the patient care pathway.
 - HCPs did not feel it was within their role to discuss sexual wellbeing.
 - Some HCPs did not think it was a priority for or relevant to the patient.
 - Concern that raising the issue could potentially embarrass or offend the patient and harm the HCP-patient relationship.
- Resources such as fact sheets do exist to aid discussion, but many health care professionals were unaware of them, and most of those that were, did not use them routinely.
- CLAHRC researchers have carried out training with hospital staff to build confidence and raise awareness of the need to support patients in this way.

References and resources

Mellor RM, Greenfield SM, Dowswell G, Sheppard JP, Quinn T, McManus RJ. Health Care Professionals' Views on Discussing Sexual Wellbeing with Patients Who Have Had a Stroke: A Qualitative Study. *PLoS One*. 2013; **8**(10): e78802. [\[Link\]](#).

Stroke Association factsheet, Sex After Stroke
www.stroke.org.uk/factsheet/sex-after-stroke.



Recommendations for practice

- Simple changes can be made to stroke services to help 'normalise' the discussion of sensitive topics with patients and their partners.
- Changes to standard care policies and access to information can give HCPs the confidence and motivation to routinely raise sexual wellbeing with their patients.
- The study suggests that change needs to take place now.

What is NIHR CLAHRC West Midlands?

The Collaborations for Leadership in Applied Health Research and Care (CLAHRC) is a partnership between universities (Birmingham, Warwick and Keele) and a number of health and social care organisations in the West Midlands. We are funded by the National Institute for Health Research with a mission to undertake high-quality applied health research focused on the needs of patients to improve health services locally and beyond.

For further information, visit:

www.clahrc-wm.nihr.ac.uk

The research is funded by the National Institute for Health Research. The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of the NHS, the NIHR or the Department of Health.