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.
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.

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.

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References and resources
