Increasing Stroke Awareness

By Jim Baranski

A few months ago, I overheard an interesting conversation on a flight from Los Angeles to New York. Two businessmen were sitting across the aisle from me deep in conversation when I heard the word "stroke."

One of the men asked, "Did you hear that John had a stroke last week?" The other responded, "You're kidding ... where?" I anticipated that the answer would be "at the office" or "at home." But instead I heard him say, "I'm not sure, I think in his arm, maybe his heart. I don't know."

This reminded me a little of myself before I became involved with the dreaded disease called a stroke, and I decided to share my story with them. Before my involvement with the National Stroke Association (NSA) a little over three years ago, the word stroke first made me think of time on the golf course with clients. Or, I thought it was a condition that affected grandparents. I didn't know that stroke was synonymous with a "brain attack." I had heard about chest pain and heart attacks, lumps and cancer, but nothing about sudden headaches and brain attacks.

What I have since learned is frightening. More women die of stroke than breast cancer. Stroke is the third leading cause of death in the United States behind cancer and heart disease. And with at least 700,000 strokes occurring annually, it is a leading cause of disability.

I have met with numerous stroke survivors and their caregivers from all over the country. I have seen stroke's impact first hand, and it does not discriminate. Gender, age, race, income, profession, you name it ... stroke knows no boundaries. Few survivors are left with identical deficits. Because stroke is a brain attack, there is no telling where or how much of one's brain will die. With every tick of the clock, brain cells are lost. Hence the phrase "time is brain."

Many of these stroke survivors have shared with me the challenges of recovery and rehabilitation. The frustration of being able to comprehend when spoken to, but unable to speak. To barely walk, but never run. To eat, but not taste. To lose all dignity. To be a burden to family and friends.

Some stroke survivors suffer memory loss. They may need a reminder to help them finish a sentence or remember what to do next. They may be confused and have behavior changes. They may have difficulty controlling emotional responses, which might mean sudden laughing or crying for no apparent reason. Having a stroke can also cause depression, and a depressed person may refuse or neglect to take medication or may not be motivated to perform exercises that improve mobility. Stroke survivors may also experience pain. The weight of a paralyzed arm can cause pain in the shoulder, or pain can be traced to nerve damage. And lying or sitting in one position too long can cause the body and joints to stiffen and ache.

Now, for the good news. Many strokes are preventable. Hypertension, cholesterol, diabetes, obesity, and smoking are known risk factors for stroke and can be managed with behavior modification and modern therapeutics.

Advances in the acute treatment of stroke and the development of stroke centers in hospitals across the country are providing patient care never before available. Research in recovery and rehabilitation for stroke survivors is suggesting that the brain may be able to "rewire" itself,
compensating for cell damage.

What do you need to know in order to take advantage of these advancements for yourself or a loved one? Know the symptoms. The key to the symptoms is that they occur suddenly, with little or no warning. Sudden headache, vision and speech impairment, dizziness, and numbness of face or limbs are all symptoms of a stroke. If you think you or a loved one is having a stroke, call 911 immediately.

Finally, as the plane pulled up to the gate and I concluded my mini-stroke seminar with the businessmen, one of them asked, "How do I know how I measure up to the risk factors for stroke?" I encouraged him to talk with his doctor. This is always a good idea if you have a health concern. Oh yeah, John, their co-worker, was 42 years old.

At NSA, we work to create greater awareness that stroke doesn't only happen to older people. We are aggressively taking steps to reduce the incidence and impact of stroke for all people, young and old.

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