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Depression after stroke: a neglected problem

Caregivers do not receive enough support: Treatment is more successful if everyone involved works closely together

Cologne, 9 July 2008: People who have had a stroke and the people who are close to them need more support in order to manage the consequences of stroke. As well as the physical disabilities, the psychological burden is difficult to cope with. It is not only stroke patients who become depressed: their friends and relatives often become depressed too. The German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG) has now assessed research on treatments for depression after a stroke. They found that using antidepressants after a stroke does not have the effect it is expected to have. Because of their adverse effects and interactions with other drugs, antidepressants should only be used with caution.

The success of treatment depends on motivation and good support

It is often difficult, even for doctors, to know whether people are feeling down after having a stroke or whether they have slid into a depression which needs treatment. Appropriate treatment is not only important for the person's mental health; being depressed can delay their physical recovery too. There is not enough awareness about this problem. The Institute has therefore published information about this for patients, their friends and relatives today on www.InformedHealthOnline.org (URL: <http://www.InformedHealthOnline.org>).

"The success of stroke rehabilitation also depends on patients playing an active role in their own treatment," says the Institute's Director, Professor Peter Sawicki. "Rehabilitation is demanding, requiring a lot of patience and motivation. If people become depressed, it is very difficult for them to have the necessary motivation."

For treatment to be successful in the long term, it is important that doctors, nurses, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, patients, their relatives and friends work closely together. Occupational therapy and physiotherapy can help people restore their physical abilities and regain more independence. Research has shown that intensive support like this can also help with depression.

Antidepressants are not as effective as hoped and increase the risk of drug-drug interactions

Scientific studies have suggested that antidepressants may

generally be less effective in the treatment of depression after a stroke. Because these drugs can have adverse effects and may influence the effect of other drugs, researchers urge caution in the use of antidepressants.

Professor Sawicki: "Psychotropic drugs can have adverse effects and cause drug-drug interactions, particularly in older people, because they often take several drugs at the same time. Many questions remain unanswered. For example, not enough is known about how much antidepressants influence the risk of falls and seizures." People who have certain stroke-related disabilities, such as difficulty speaking or understanding, were not included in many trials.

Information for patients, their relatives and friends

Reliable information can be a great help to patients and those people close to them. Professor Sawicki: "The problem of depression after strokes has been neglected. Unfortunately there is not much readily available information on this problem in Germany and elsewhere. Relatives and friends who look after stroke patients need more support." With the information on coping psychologically after a stroke published today on www.InformedHealthOnline.org (URL: <http://www.InformedHealthOnline.org>), the Institute is helping to fill this gap. The website also provides information on occupational therapy, physiotherapy and how people can support their friends and family members who are depressed. If you would like to be kept up-to-date with the latest articles published on this independent health information website, you can subscribe to the Informed Health Online newsletter (URL: <http://www.gesundheitsinformation.de/index.258.69.en.html>).

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Glossary

depression

Depression is one of the most common mental illnesses, and it can be mild, moderate or serious. There are several different types of depression that can be recognised by different signs. Which symptoms of depression occur and how strong and frequent they are vary from person to person. People in any social or age group can be affected, both women and men. If someone has had at least two of the following symptoms for longer than two weeks, it might mean that they are depressed: deep sadness; listlessness; loss of interest in the things they usually care about.

Sources

The German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG)

The German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG) was established by legislation to provide evaluations of the effectiveness, quality and efficiency of healthcare services. This includes the assessment of medicines as well as the publication of health information for consumers and patients.

Evidence basis of our health information

Our information is based primarily on systematic reviews of the effects of health care. Systematic reviews are necessary to gain an objective picture of health care. In order to do this, a clear question is formulated. Researchers then find all the relevant studies that could answer this question. They then evaluate those studies.

You can find a list of the evidence and other scientific literature on which this information is based at [**www.informedhealthonline.org**](http://www.informedhealthonline.org)

Disclaimer

This information was prepared and published by the German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG). It is based on the evidence and other scientific literature available at the time of publication. The information is intended for the use of patients in Germany. It is not intended to for use to diagnose illnesses and the information is not intended to substitute for medical advice.