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Network should hasten treatment for strokes

Miami Herald, The (FL) - Tuesday, July 31, 2012

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Someone suffers a stroke every 45 seconds, which translates to more than 780,000 strokes in the United States annually, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Strokes are the third-leading cause of death in the United States, after heart disease and cancer. A stroke occurs when a clot blocks blood to the brain, causing brain cells to die, often resulting in impaired speech and movement, among other issues.

To expedite treatment, South Florida's firefighters, doctors and local hospitals have collaborated to create one of the largest stroke consortiums in the nation. Called FOAM-D Stroke Consortium, it will comprise seven fire departments across Miami-Dade, 16 local hospitals and doctors from Florida International University's Herbert Wertheim College of Medicine. The consortium should result in a more rapid response in treating stroke victims.

There are four hospitals in Miami-Dade that have comprehensive stroke centers: Aventura, Baptist, Jackson and Mount Sinai, along with three in Broward: Broward Health North, Holy Cross and Memorial Regional.

"From the very beginning, part of the mission of our college has been to continually support the quality of health care of the South Florida community," said Dr. John Rock, dean and senior vice president for medical affairs at FIU's College of Medicine. "What a better way than for our doctors to be an integral part of this historic stroke network. This is an unprecedented partnership that will help save lives in a community that we serve."

The vision to create a stroke network began in 1999, when only about half of the hospitals in South Florida were performing CT scans on a 24-7 basis. The scans are necessary to administer the clot-dissolving drug TPA (tissue plasminogen activator).

Dr. Alejandro Forteza, director of the Cardiovascular and Stroke Institute for Jackson Health System and a neurology professor at FIU, and Dr. Jeffrey Horstmyer, founding chairman of the department of neurology at FIU, started a nonprofit with local fire departments called the Miami-Dade Stroke Coalition. The coalition worked with emergency room doctors, fire departments and hospitals so every hospital in the coalition could conduct scans on a 24/7 basis and therefore administer the clot-dissolving drug.

The physicians then instituted comprehensive stroke care, which is given to patients who have suffered a stroke to the brain, or have been suffering for more than 3 1/2 hours. In these cases, a patient has to see an interventional neuroradiologist, who removes the clot by inserting a catheter that can suction it out.

Forteza and Horstmyer, working with the EMS committee headed by Capt. John Curry, also designed a two-page checklist called the Stroke Alert, based off a prototype from Lake

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County. Firefighters say this new checklist helps expedite transporting stroke victims to the right treatment center.

"We are the ones responsible for making sure we make the appropriate assessment on the scene and get the patient transported to the hospital, and most importantly for a stroke, take patients to the appropriate hospital," said Chief Javier Otero of the Miami Beach Fire Department. "What this expedition of care does is reduce and hopefully eventually eliminate deaths, but mostly the loss in quality of life after a stroke."

The consortium also will collect data from the hospitals to determine whether current practices are effective.

Lastly, Forteza said Phase 2 will include educating the public about the symptoms of a stroke.

"One program will be teaching school children about the symptoms of strokes and having them teach their parents as homework," Forteza said.

Provided By: The McClatchy Company

Index Terms: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Called FOAM-D Stroke Consortium; Herbert Wertheim College of Medicine; Holy Cross; College of Medicine; Cardiovascular and Stroke Institute for Jackson Health System; Miami-Dade Stroke Coalition; Miami Beach Fire Department

Location(s): Mount Sinai

Personal Name(s): John Rock; Alejandro Forteza; Jeffrey Horstmyer; John Curry; Javier Otero

Record Number:

201207310000KNRIDDERFLMIAMIH_876e1048262b9da8e8cb6ff7389c0108

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