Brain Attacks: Research on stroke supports endovascular treatment

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HARLINGEN – New medical research supports the use of “endovascular treatment” for patients who suffer strokes or “brain attacks.”

The research found conclusive evidence that endovascular treatment can help save patients’ lives and reduce the level of disability suffered by stroke patients.

During endovascular treatments, a stroke patient is taken to a “neuro-catheterization laboratory,” where specialized “endovascular neurologists” insert a small hollow tube (catheter) into the patient’s leg and route the tube through the blood vessels to the brain.

The physician then injects a clot-busting medication — or inserts a tiny mechanical device, such as a “retrievable stent” — to open the blood vessel, so that blood and oxygen can once again flow to the brain.

In the Valley, endovascular stroke treatment is available at Valley Baptist Medical Center in Harlingen, which is the only hospital south of San Antonio to offer this service.

Two specially-trained endovascular neurologists at Valley Baptist provide 24-hour coverage for patients needing specialized treatment for stroke.

Valley Baptist has been treating stroke patients who are transferred from other hospitals as far away as Corpus Christi and Rio Grande City, with treatment taking place in two specially-equipped “bi-plane” neurovascular angiography suites in Valley Baptist’s Cath Lab.

Having endovascular stroke treatment available in the Valley has also expanded the time window in which stroke patients can be treated, as Valley Baptist endovascular neurologists Dr. Ameer Hassan and Dr. Wondwossen Tekle can treat patients up to eight hours or more after symptoms begin.

However, it is still critical for people with symptoms of stroke to call 911 immediately, as the sooner that treatment begins, the more of the patient’s brain the doctors can potentially save.

Dr. Hassan said the recent research is “cutting edge”, and as it was discussed at a national
conference on stroke hosted in Florida by the Society of Vascular and Interventional Neurology, he anticipates that it will eventually “change the care of stroke patients throughout the world.”

“The good news is that we offer this ‘gold standard’ of stroke treatment right here in the Valley, at Valley Baptist; we are the only hospital south of San Antonio to offer endovascular stroke treatment,” Dr. Hassan said.

“Valley Baptist is also the only research hospital in the Valley for stroke; the only hospital doing neurological research that has funding from the National Institutes of Health.”

Dr. Hassan said that “overwhelming evidence” of the benefits of endovascular stroke treatment led to two clinical trials being halted earlier than expected — because researchers already had enough scientific proof that the interventional treatment benefits stroke patients when treated within six hours after stroke symptoms begin.

One of the studies, the “MR CLEAN” trial, demonstrated “statistically significant positive outcomes for stroke patients treated with catheter-based therapy,” according to the World Stroke Congress, an international conference which was held in Istanbul, Turkey in October.

Dr. Hassan has conducted several stroke trials in the Valley, and was involved in another recent study which showed that Hispanics along the Mexican border are less likely to receive medications to treat strokes and 30 percent more likely to die from “brain attacks” than non-Hispanic patients.

The study suggested that many Hispanics may be waiting too long to come to the hospital for treatment of “brain attacks.”

Many Valley residents are considered at risk for both “brain attacks” and heart attacks, because of high rates of diabetes, high blood pressure, and a high-cholesterol, high-fat diet.

Dr. Hassan said it’s critical for Valley residents to learn the warning signs of stroke — and to call 911 immediately if they or their loved one experiences symptoms. Residents should use the “FAST” method for responding to a possible stroke, according to the American Stroke Association:

FACE: Ask the person to smile. Does one side of the face droop?

ARMS: Ask the person to raise both arms. Does one arm drift downward?

SPEECH: Ask the person to repeat a simple phrase. Is their speech slurred or strange?

TIME: If you observe any of these signs, call 9-1-1 immediately.

Along with Dr. Hassan and Dr. Tekle, other neurologists who are serving Valley stroke patients at the Valley Baptist Brain and Spine Network include Dr. Victoria Parada, Board-Certified Vascular Neurologist and Clinical Director of Neurosciences and the Stroke Program at Valley Baptist-Harlingen, and Dr. Felix Rivera, Neurologist. For more information about prevention and treatment
for stroke, consult your physician and visit www.ValleyBaptist.net.