RESCUE PROJECT DIVES INTO NEXT PHASE

Web-Based Informational Materials for Caregivers of Veterans Post-Stroke

On August 1st, the RESCUE Team held a focus group with healthcare providers at the VA in San Juan, Puerto Rico to gain feedback on the stroke caregiver fact sheets and Web site. There will be two more focus groups for providers, one in Gainesville, Florida and the other in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. We will also conduct one-on-one interviews with informal caregivers of veteran stroke survivors at all three sites. The feedback provided will help improve the informational fact sheets and shape the future RESCUE Web site into a great resource for information on stroke and stroke caregiving.

So far, a total of 37 informational fact sheets for informal caregivers of veteran stroke survivors have been completed and approved by the My HealtheVet Clinical Advisory Board. All 37 fact sheets have also been translated into Spanish.

COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS AFTER STROKE

One of the many challenges that a survivor can face after stroke is difficulty in communicating with others. Impairments to communication include difficulty speaking and understanding, as well as difficulty with reading and writing. Aphasia is the most common communication problem that affects stroke survivors. It is caused by damage to the parts of the brain that control language and can affect the survivor’s ability to speak or understand what others are saying, as well as their ability to read or write. With aphasia, the survivor’s sentences may be fractured or missing crucial words. Some survivors may mix the sounds up in words or use words with related meanings, like food instead of drink. Aphasia is not a thinking problem. The survivor who has aphasia likely knows exactly what he is saying but is unable to express it correctly. The words may come out wrong but they are clear in the survivor’s mind. For example, a stroke survivor asks his wife for tomatoes. In his mind, he hears himself saying the word “tomatoes,” but when the word is spoken it comes out as “peanuts.” His wife hears peanuts and when she brings him peanuts the survivor gets angry. He believes he is speaking normally and is puzzled by why she can’t understand what he wants. She believes she has given him exactly what he has asked for. Now both are frustrated and so begins the back and forth struggle to make sense of what is said.

Cognitive problems such as short-term memory loss and difficulty concentrating can place additional strain on communication. This can lead to frustration and anger as the survivor struggles to understand and be understood. It is important that providers refer their patients with communication problems to a speech and language therapist. The therapist will assess the communication difficulties and determine the plan for treatment. While some communication problems may improve over time, others may be permanent. Family and friends need education about how to communicate with the stroke survivor.

The American Geriatrics Society Foundation for Health in Aging has developed a comprehensive on-line guide for family caregivers. Eldercare at Home includes a chapter on communication problems. Chapter 16 provides helpful tips for dealing with communication problems, including: Avoid asking for multiple repetitions. Often what someone says is equally hard to understand the second and third times. Instead of asking someone to repeat, try one of these strategies:

- Ask specific questions. ("Are we talking about dinner?")
- Ask for another phrasing. ("Tell me in a different way.")
- Ask a follow-up question to confirm or clarify. ("Did you say you wanted to go for a walk?")
- Ask yourself if you need to know exactly what the person said. Sometimes you may want to just let it go.

Eldercare at Home can be found on-line on the AGS Foundation for Healthy Aging Web site:
www.healthinaging.org/public_education/eldercare/
RESCUE FACT SHEET SPOTLIGHT: “SPEECH AND COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS”

The RESCUE project fact sheet titled “Speech and Communication Problems” contains information to educate the caregiver about communication problems, why it is important to seek treatment, and ways to improve interactions with the survivor.

The following are helpful tips for caregivers for dealing with communication problems in the stroke survivor:

- Remove noise distractions like the radio. This will help the stroke survivor focus on your words.
- Face the stroke survivor and keep eye contact when you talk.
- Speak slowly with simple words and phrases the survivor can understand.
- Ask the survivor to repeat things that are not clear.
- When possible, ask the survivor questions with “yes” or “no” answers.
- Give the survivor an aphasia card to carry that states the speech problem is a medical condition.

This fact sheet also offers information about helpful resources that address communication problems, such as:

- American Stroke Association: www.strokeassociation.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=3030350
- National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD): www.nidcd.nih.gov
- Aphasia Hope Foundation: www.aphasiahope.org/media_resources.jsp?type=caregivers

PRINTABLE APHASIA CARD

The RESCUE team has created a wallet-size Aphasia Card for the stroke survivor. This card explains what aphasia is and offers a helpful tip for communicating with the stroke survivor. A space on the back of the card is provided for the caregiver’s contact information in case of emergency.

A printable version of the aphasia card will be available for download from the RESCUE Web site at: www.rorc.research.va.gov/rescue/aphasia_card.cfm

Next Issue’s Featured Article: "National Caregiver Month"

American Stroke Association

The American Stroke Association (ASA) has a series of patient information sheets on stroke. These include topics on stroke prevention as well as life after stroke.

The information sheet, “Let’s Talk About Stroke and Aphasia” answers the following questions:

- What is aphasia?
- How does it feel to have aphasia?
- Are there different types of aphasia?
- How can family and friends help?
- How can I learn more?
- What are the warning signs of stroke?

To download “Let’s Talk About Stroke and Aphasia” or to learn more about Aphasia from the ASA visit: www.strokeassociation.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=3030324

MyHealtheVet

MyHealtheVet has provided nine ways for patients AND caregivers to monitor health measures such as blood pressure, blood sugar, heart rate, cholesterol, body weight, and pain level. Each measure can be viewed as a table or displayed as a graph. MHV visitors can also access the Activity Journal and Food Journal, which is very helpful for people following a special diet or watching their weight.

A great benefit of this feature is that a caregiver or Veteran patient can access their information from anywhere with an Internet connection, making it easy to share with a health care provider.

To use the Self Enter Info (SEI) feature, log in to MyHealtheVet at www.myhealth.va.gov, click on the TRACK HEALTH tab and then click the VITALS + READINGS tab.
A GREAT NEW RESOURCE FOR PROVIDERS AND PATIENTS!

The VHA National Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention (NCP) and the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) have partnered to produce a series of patient brochures and clinician fact sheets on the cardiovascular recommendations of the US Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF). The series is called “Partnership for Health.”

The Clinician Fact Sheets include:
- Screening for Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm
- Screening for Coronary Heart Disease
- Using Aspirin for the Primary Prevention of Cardiovascular Events
- Screening for Vascular Disease (carotid artery stenosis and peripheral vascular disease)

The Patient Health Education Brochures include:
- Screening for Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm
- High Blood Pressure
- High Cholesterol
- Taking Aspirin to Prevent Heart Attacks in Men
- Taking Aspirin to Prevent Strokes in Women

The brochures and fact sheets are available electronically on the NCP Web site in high resolution PDF format suitable for printing at http://www.prevention.va.gov/Clinical_Resources_Partnership_for_Health.asp.

Did You Know?

- Approximately 1,000,000 people in the U.S. have aphasia. The majority of these cases are a result of stroke.
- Aphasia may co-occur with speech disorders, such as dysarthria or apraxia of speech.
- Most people with aphasia can benefit from therapy by a speech and language pathologist.

Facts from the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association

Links in this Issue

DISCLAIMER OF HYPERLINKS: The appearance of external hyperlinks does not constitute endorsement by the Department of Veterans Affairs or the RESCUE Project of the linked web site, or the information, products or services offered by this site. In addition, this site may have privacy and security policies that are inconsistent with those of the Department of Veterans Affairs. For other than authorized VA activities, the Department does not exercise any editorial control over the information you may find at these locations. All links are provided with the intent of meeting the mission of the Department of Veterans Affairs and the RESCUE Newsletter and forthcoming Web site. Please let us know about existing external links which you believe are inappropriate.

RESOLVE Web Site
http://www.rorc.research.va.gov/rescue

VA My HealtheVet
http://www.myhealth.va.gov

http://www.rorc.research.va.gov/rescue

Web-Based Informational Materials for Caregivers of Veterans Post-Stroke
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