Persistent high stroke mortality in Bangladeshi populations

Citation for published version:

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):
10.1136/bmj.331.7525.1096

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:
BMJ

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Persistent high stroke mortality in Bangladeshi populations

Novel hypotheses to explain this need testing urgently

Censuses in 1981, 1991, and 2001 (Wild et al. Persistence of substantial inequalities in cardiovascular disease mortality by country of birth in England and Wales 2001-2003. Unpublished manuscript), have shown that, among Bangladeshi-born men living in the United Kingdom, the standardised mortality ratio for stroke is two to three times the population average, with less marked but important excesses in Bangladeshi-born women. There has been little progress in understanding the reasons for this variation, let alone in identifying approaches to improve outcomes. Lessons learnt about stroke among British Bangladeshis may well apply to other populations at high risk, including Indians and Pakistanis, whose excess stroke mortality is not quite so high. In addition, such evidence could be highly relevant to reducing health inequalities.

Is the excess mortality from stroke in Bangladeshis explained by a higher case fatality ratio? Interim analysis of data from the south London stroke register shows no age adjusted difference in survival between Bangladeshis and white Europeans (albeit based on a small population), but does find an almost doubled age adjusted incidence of stroke in Bangladeshis (Smeeton N, personal communication of unpublished data from Stewart et al.). Thus, these mortality data seem to reflect a real excess that cannot be explained by a higher case fatality.

To what extent, then, can these differences be explained by an excess of risk factors for stroke? Hypertension is the most important potential explanation, but studies conducted in east London and Newcastle found Bangladeshi adults to have on average a mean systolic blood pressure that is 10 mm Hg lower than that of white Europeans. Total and low density lipoprotein cholesterol concentrations are also comparably low among Bangladeshis. Bangladeshi men tend, however, to have a high prevalence of diabetes, smoking, physical inactivity, and high serum triglyceride concentrations, and low serum high density lipoprotein cholesterol concentrations.

For women, the burden from these risk factors is also high, except for smoking, which is uncommon. Bangladeshis are also among the poorest of Britain’s populations.

The Framingham stroke model and European SCORE model both predict comparatively low rates of stroke and cerebrovascular disease. For example, in Bangladeshis the Framingham model predicts the incidence of stroke to be 52% (95% confidence interval 35% to 77%) of that for the white European population. We need to look beyond classic stroke risk factors.

We suggest four specific lines of investigation that warrant consideration—squatting and straining at stool, vitamin D deficiency, infection, and the combined impact of smoking and tobacco chewing. Chakrabarti’s work on three groups—patients with stroke, healthy volunteers, and hypertensive patients—has identified squatting as a potential causal or precipitating factor for stroke. Squatting is a fairly common posture among South Asians and is known to raise blood pressure by about 4–8 mm Hg with a sustained effect during the period of squatting; importantly, this blood pressure rise is greatest in the central vasculature.

Vitamin D deficiency is very common among Bangladeshis in London, because of a diet lacking fish, ghee, and eggs among both sexes and lack of exposure to sunlight, particularly among women. Vitamin D deficiency may raise the risk of stroke by increasing insulin resistance and hypertension, or may worsen outcomes after stroke by impairing neuroprotective mechanisms.

Chronic inflammation is a well recognised risk factor for stroke. A recent large case series reported that the incidences of both myocardial infarction and stroke were significantly raised in the few days after acute infection, particularly of the respiratory tract. Many Bangladeshis in the UK live in overcrowded households, with consequent increased risk of respira,


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Primary Care

Diabetes and the quality and outcomes framework

The rapidly rising prevalence of diabetes in the United Kingdom demands an effective response from healthcare services. British general practitioners were among the first doctors in primary care worldwide to manage many aspects of diabetes care in their own practices, and by the millennium were providing systematic diabetes care. Primary care based interventions are cost effective—lower healthcare costs and healthier populations. Countries with strong primary healthcare systems have seen the most benefits. The 2003 general medical services contract signalled the development of chronic disease management, based interventions in primary care and to encourage further expansion of chronic disease management, including diabetes care, into general practice. The contract introduced a quality and outcomes framework, designed to monitor the quality of the delivery of primary care.

In this week’s BMJ Campbell and colleagues report that general practitioners were already improving effective care for three of the diseases covered by the framework. One of these was diabetes, which is assessed by 18 clinical indicators in the general medical services contract. Contract data shows the prevalence of diabetes is 3.3% in England and Scotland, 3.8% in Wales, and 2.8% in Northern Ireland, and in England more than 93% of general practices achieved the minimum points for diabetes care.

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Acknowledgement: See bmj.com

Competing interests: The authors are part of a collaboration between teams in Edinburgh and London that has applied to the Medical Research Council for a grant for a case-control study that will include exploration of the issues raised here.


