Survival after stroke in south London

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Survival after stroke in south London
Is apparently higher in black patients than in white ones

Few studies have compared the incidence and outcome of stroke in black and white people from the same population. Two population based stroke registers in US cities and one in the United Kingdom (the south London stroke register) found twice the incidence of stroke adjusted for age and sex in black people than in white people. Adjusting for socioeconomic status in the south London register attenuated but did not abolish this excess.

None of these registers has found a significant difference between black people and white people in survival after stroke, and all have therefore attributed the excess mortality in black people to a higher incidence of stroke.

The south London register now includes more than 2000 patients with a first ever stroke over seven years and has accrued 6000 person years of follow-up. Such studies are rare these days even in the UK, whose universal healthcare system makes it an ideal location for population based epidemiological research. The challenges include obtaining ethical approval for observational studies without explicit consent, getting long term grants to support the research, and maintaining the enthusiasm of the research team and its collaborators.

In today’s BMJ, Wolfe et al present their updated comparison of survival after stroke in black people and white people. On the face of it, the findings are surprising: black patients seemed to have a survival advantage, with a reduction of about a third in the relative risk of dying, corresponding to an increased median survival time of almost 14 months. So is this finding real or a methodological artefact, and if artefact what are the possible reasons? One possible methodological explanation is differential ascertainment of stroke cases between ethnic groups. The researchers on the south London register have previously assessed completeness of case ascertainment by using capture-recapture methods, implying that it is almost 90% complete for both black people and white people.¹ However, the validity of these methods for stroke registers has been questioned.² Also the proportions of cases in the register that were notified by general practitioners (14%) and not admitted to hospital (15%) were lower than in the UK based Oxfordshire Community Stroke Project and its successor, the Oxford vascular study, in both of which most patients were not admitted to hospital (14%).³

The researchers on the south London register have previously assessed completeness of case ascertainment by using capture-recapture methods, implying that it is almost 90% complete for both black people and white people. However, the validity of these methods for stroke registers has been questioned. Also the proportions of cases in the register that were notified by general practitioners (14%) and not admitted to hospital (15%) were lower than in the UK based Oxfordshire Community Stroke Project and its successor, the Oxford vascular study, in both of which most cases were notified by general practitioners, and over 40% were not admitted to hospital. This may indicate that the register missed a disproportionate number of patients with mild strokes who were not admitted to hospital. If this affected more white patients than black ones (for example, if more black patients sought care directly at hospital rather than at their general practice, and white patients obtained private health care outside the NHS more often, making it apparently higher in black patients than in white ones.

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Cardiac impairment or heart failure?

“Heart failure” confuses doctors and patients and needs renaming

There is no disease that you either have or don’t have—except perhaps sudden death or rabies. All other diseases you either have a little or a lot of,” said Geoffrey Rose.1 This is true of “heart failure”—everybody can have a bit if they try hard enough, by physical exertion or even by emotional shock.2 But, apart from transient induced cardiac overload, the term can be used to mean anything from asymptomatic systolic dysfunction to imminent death from pulmonary oedema. Because of widely varying definitions, the epidemiology of heart failure can become almost uninterpretable, with estimates of its prevalence in the United Kingdom varying from 500 000 to 3 million.3 Moreover, qualitative studies show that many patients are never told that they have heart failure because doctors are understandably reluctant to use the term.4 When a label confuses doctors and impairs communication with patients, it seems sensible to change the label.

The recent increase in interest in heart failure began with interventional studies among highly selected patients. They were mainly men aged 60-65 on average, with a history of myocardial infarction or cardiac ischaemia, and a left systolic ejection fraction of less than 30-35% as measured by cardiac catheterisation or radionuclide ventriculography. After initial success in