Saving TIME Saves Lives

BY NAOMI MORRISON

Time is of the essence when it comes to a stroke. First, taking the time to help prevent stroke by exercising and eating right. And second, getting a medical assessment as quickly as possible if symptoms of a stroke should occur. Recognizing the signs is crucial.

A stroke takes place when a blood vessel either bursts or is blocked by a clot and doesn’t allow vital oxygen and nutrients to reach the brain. The brain affected by this occurrence begins to die. According to the American Stroke Association, about 795,000 Americans each year suffer a new or recurrent stroke, making it the number four cause of death as well as the leading cause of disability in the U.S.

In Whitefish, this small community and its visitors are fortunate to have state-of-the-art Tele-Stroke equipment that allows North Valley Hospital Emergency Department physicians to connect with Kalispell neurologists located at their office or home. Drs. Bret and Kurt Lindsay, who are also fellowship-trained stroke specialists, and Drs. Donald Stone and Patrick assist North Valley Hospital physicians with assessing stroke patients and recommending available treatment options. The best part: The Tele-Stroke equipment enables patients and their families to connect via webcam with these specialists to quickly receive an important consultation for treatment, saving precious time.

“The key with stroke is to make quick decisions in a timely fashion,” said Dr. Kurt Lindsay. The American Stroke Association’s motto is: Learn to recognize a stroke, because time lost is brain lost. There are treatment options for the most common type of stroke, such as tissue plasminogen activator (tPA), or “clot busters.” This medicine can potentially reduce further brain damage, but only if patients receive help within three hours of their first symptoms.

“Time is brain,” said Dr. Jon Torgerson, North Valley Hospital Emergency Department physician. “The quicker you can administer the clot buster for those who meet the criteria, the more beneficial it is for the patient. Every minute of travel time saved could save a patient one minute of brain.” The Tele-Stroke gives a small critical access hospital the same advantage as a larger hospital for this time-sensitive medicine.

The initial evaluation with a North Valley Hospital Emergency Department physician will provide a preliminary assessment of the patient to determine treatment options. This assessment includes a questionnaire, CT scan and lab work. The remote Tele-Stroke connection then allows the physicians to have the additional expertise of the stroke neurologists who can answer patient and family questions.

“Families love it,” Lindsay said, “because they get to talk to a specialist and ER doctor at the same time while making decisions. If a patient is given tPA in the ER, they are transferred to the ICU after being stabilized. Families feel reassured because they see the same face that was on the Tele-Stroke screen.”

How does the Tele-Stroke equipment work? Using a joystick from their Kalispell home or office, the doctors move the Emergency Department camera to actively examine the patient. The patient is asked to perform a series of movements such as holding his hands out or touching his nose with his fingers. If it’s determined that the patient is a candidate for tPA, the neurologists and Emergency Department doctor counsel the family about the risks and benefits.

Preventing Strokes

The American Heart Association has long been an advocate of a good diet and moderate exercise to reduce the risks of having a stroke. People who eat meals high in whole grains, fruits, and vegetables and engage in 30 minutes of walking or comparable exercise daily have a considerably lower risk of stroke than people who don’t. “We have a long way to go to fix strokes,” Torgerson said. “What we really need to do is help prevent strokes with our diet and exercise. I encourage people to take proactive measures.”