Stroke patients are not treated quickly enough

Adrian O'Dowd *London*

The NHS needs an increase of 400-500% in the number of stroke specialists to improve stroke care to acceptable standards, it has been claimed. The *National Sentinel Stroke Audit 2004*, published this week, found that standards of stroke care had undergone "dramatic improvement" in recent years but that huge problems remained.

The audit of all hospitals in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland found that 82% of hospitals in England had stroke units by April 2004, when the survey was done, while the proportion of hospitals that had stroke units in Northern Ireland was 85%, and in Wales 45%. The percentage in England had risen from 74% in 2001. England's national service framework for older people set a

target for all hospitals to have such a unit by 2004.

While praising improvements since the last audit, the report also found examples of "lamentable care." It said:

- On a typical weekday, just more than half of stroke inpatients were in a stroke unit
- More than 40% of patients were not given a scan within 24 hours of admission
- Only two thirds of patients were started on aspirin within 48 hours as a way of reducing mortality and disability.

Tony Rudd, chairman of the intercollegiate working party for stroke, the body behind the work, and a consultant physician at St Thomas' Hospital, London, said, "The quality of stroke care has been steadily increasing over the years, but there are still huge

problems in delivery of good stroke care.

"The number of people with heart attacks is slightly greater than numbers of people admitted with stroke but just £1 [\$1.91; €1.43] is spent on stroke research for every £20 spent on heart disease and £50 on cancer research. We need more stroke specialists."

He estimated that each hospital with a population of 250 000 patients needed two whole time equivalent stroke specialists—that is, a 400-500% increase in such specialists.

Jon Barrick, chief executive of the Stroke Association, said that the United Kingdom has 700 cardiologists but a mere 90 stroke care specialists, despite the fact that stroke is the United Kingdom's third biggest killer.

"This report paints a very sor-

ry picture of stroke care," said Mr Barrick. "Despite real progress over recent years, there are still unacceptable delays in diagnosis and a lack of specialist treatment."

Each year in the United Kingdom about 130 000 people have a stroke, of whom a third are likely to die.

The audit was carried out by the Royal College of Physicians between April and June 2004 and funded by the Healthcare Commission. Later this year a service will be developed by the Royal College of Physicians, the British Association of Stroke Physicians, and the Stroke Association whereby trusts can commission visits from a team of specialists to help identify solutions. □

The full report is available at www.rcplondon.ac.uk/pubs/books

Service framework threatened by shortage of neurologists

Caroline White *London*

The shortage of neurologists and the absence of dedicated funding threaten to undermine the UK government's national service framework on long term conditions, experts have warned. The mandatory framework, published last week, sets out 11 quality standards for developing integrated services in England, to provide care for patients from diagnosis to death and support for family and carers.

Although the framework applies to all long term conditions, it focuses on long term neurological disorders, which are estimated to affect around 10 million people in the United Kingdom, including 200 000 to 400 000 with epilepsy, 50 000 to 60 000 with multiple sclerosis, and 420 000 with brain injury.

Some of the new services will include flexible joint health and social care plans, regular needs assessment, single point of access, and self referral back into the system rather than reliance on a GP.

But the plans will depend on much closer collaboration across the NHS and with other sectors than at present. Ian Philp, national director of older people's services, and Kathryn Hudson, national director of social care, have been appointed jointly to drive the plans forward. A network of neurology experts will also advise on implementation.

Charities and lobby groups have welcomed the framework, but there are concerns that it will be insufficiently resourced.

Commissioning bodies have

10 years to implement the framework fully, but the government has said that there will be no additional funding. Community care minister Stephen Ladyman said: "[Primary care trusts] have the resources to be getting on with it," adding that the framework would save money.

But Professor Christopher Kennard, president of the

Association of British Neurologists, told the *BMJ* that there was a shortage of neurologists. There are 375 whole time equivalent consultants in England, but a minimum of 950 is needed, he said. □

National Service Framework for Long-Term Conditions is available at www.dh.gov.uk

A boy has his brain monitored with electroencephalography. The framework should ensure that patients in England receive joint health and social care plans and regular needs assessment