

Stroke campaign aims to get victims help quickly

fredericksburg.com/news/local/stroke-campaign-aims-to-get-victims-help-quickly/article_043803c6-cd4e-5d29-ad4d-22fc12947576.html

May 28, 2022



Cathy Dyson

She always did everything she could to stay healthy, from running 5 miles a day to watching her weight and keeping her blood pressure and cholesterol under control.

He worked long hours, had lots of stress and not enough rest, and was more “worried about the god-almighty dollar” than his health.

Both suffered strokes, the fifth-leading cause of death in the United States.

But because one got immediate help and the other didn’t, the two had markedly different outcomes.

Nancy Fleischer, 77, was visiting a friend in Ohio who immediately recognized what was happening. Within two hours, Fleischer was hospitalized, scanned and getting TPA, or Tissue Plasminogen Activator. The medicine dissolves clots that cut off the blood supply to the

brain, which is what causes a stroke.

The Spotsylvania County woman still has issues at times with processing her thoughts and getting out the right words. Yet she believes the day the stroke happened 3½ years ago was the luckiest of her life because it eventually revealed a lifelong heart problem which has been treated with medicine.

“I feel better since my stroke, except for not being able to talk sometimes,” she said.

Bert Seitzinger was 49 when he had a mini stroke, followed by “the big one” three weeks later. He didn’t recognize what was happening and too much time passed before he got medical help.

Now 62, he lost the use of his left arm and hand and must wear a brace to stabilize his left leg because his ankle wants to turn out and his foot, in.

“I’m the perfect example of not knowing the signs and symptoms of a stroke,” said the North Stafford resident who’s spent much of the last 13 years working to educate others.

The two shared their stories last week as medical and elected officials gathered to announce a new health initiative called Stroke Smart Fredericksburg. The city has become the first locality in the region to proclaim the designation, meaning it’s encouraging people to learn the signs of stroke so they can identify when one happens and immediately call 911.

“Look at the people out here,” Fredericksburg Fire Chief Mike Jones said to a group of about 100 gathered at the new Rappahannock Emergency Medical Services Council office near Mary Washington Hospital. “One in 6 of us will probably suffer a stroke in our lifetime. If we get people to the hospitals and get the right treatments to them, they’ll be able to make either a partial or full recovery, and that’s something that didn’t happen 20 or 30 years ago.”

What hasn’t changed in a quarter of a century is the time lapse between when a stroke happens and people call 911, according to the proclamation read by Fredericksburg Mayor Mary Katherine Greenlaw.

People simply don’t recognize a stroke is happening and seek help, said Alan Stillman, who worked five years ago to have his city, Alexandria, declared Stroke Smart.

Since then, the designation has spread to three states—Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania—and many localities in Northern Virginia.

He’s campaigned to “spot a stroke, stop a stroke and save a life.” He’s created “Be Stroke Smart” cards and magnets that illustrate the signs: one side of a person’s smile droops or an arm drifts downward. People suddenly have trouble seeing or speaking, understanding or walking or with their balance. They may feel weak or numb on one side.

“Call 911 for even one sign,” according to his “Be Stroke Smart” card, which adds, “Call 911 even if signs stop.”

Stillman wishes people would react to signs of stroke the same way they do when they witness a cardiac arrest.

“If somebody falls on the floor and they’re not breathing, nobody for a second says, Let’s give it an hour and see what happens. Let’s call the doctor and see what he suggests. Let’s call the nurse helpline,” Stillman said. “But when a stroke happens, people call 911 probably 10% of the time.”

The image of what happened when help wasn’t called has been seared into his memory from age 12. His Grandma Rose had a stroke and his mother didn’t understand what was happening. She tried to give the older woman coffee, which spilled down the front of her—and remained there for three days until the boy convinced his mother to get help.

“My mother, somehow, kept thinking that whatever it was, it would go away,” Stillman said.

It didn’t.

His grandmother never walked or spoke again. She died shortly after the stroke, and his mother, who struggled with depression, overdosed on sleeping pills and died. Stillman’s father had disappeared when he was an infant, so Stillman was alone in the world. He lived in foster homes from age 13 on.

“The stroke had this horrific effect on my grandmother, my mother and me,” he said. “As an adult, I learned the treatments for stroke, but they’re time-dependent and about 90% never get treated simply because people don’t call 911 because they don’t realize it’s a medical emergency.”

As part of the initiative, the city will encourage students and school staff, health and safety groups, businesses and civic organizations, senior communities and faith-based organizations to be able to identify the signs of stroke.

“For those who live, work, play or pray in the city of Fredericksburg, we want them to be educated on what goes on with strokes, how you can prevent strokes and how you can get people the help they need in a timely fashion,” Jones said.

Cathy Dyson: 540/374-5425

cdyson@freelancestar.com

STROKE RESOURCES

STROKE SUPPORT: Mary Washington Healthcare's Stroke Support Group has provided resources for stroke survivors and their families for more than 10 years. The group meets on the first Monday of every month at the Fick Conference Center, 1301 Sam Perry Blvd., on the campus of Mary Washington Hospital.

For more information, contact coordinator Susan Halpin at 540/741-4815 or susan.halpin@mwhc.com. Details are available [online](#).

STROKE EDUCATION: Spotsylvania Regional Medical Center will focus on stroke education and demonstrate hands-only CPR on Wednesday from 2–4 p.m. The event is being held during the hospital's weekly Farmers Market, held each Wednesday from 2–6 p.m. in the hospital parking lot.

STROKE REGISTRY: Launched this month, the Virginia Stroke Registry will collect information on the incidence and treatment of strokes statewide. Officials will use the data to identify ways to help stroke patients from the 911 call to the hospital and from rehabilitation to post-acute care, according to the Virginia Department of Health.

The registry will highlight successful treatments and help determine where resources are needed. More information is available at vdh.virginia.gov/stroke.

AREA STROKE RATES

Orange County has the lowest rate in the region of people who die from strokes. Its rate is 60 per 100,000 residents, which is considerably lower than state and national averages.

Here's the rate of fatal strokes per 100,000 people in the Fredericksburg area, according to the [Virginia Department of Health](#):

CAROLINE: 74

CULPEPER: 62

FAUQUIER: 65

FREDERICKSBURG: 62

KING GEORGE: 70

ORANGE: 60

SPOTSYLVANIA: 61

STAFFORD: 66

WESTMORELAND: 72

Cathy Dyson

I've been lucky enough to be a newspaper reporter for more than 40 years, covering everything from human-interest stories to medical news, farming to fracking, personal columns to county government.