

Health, Wellbeing and Local Government Committee

Committee Inquiry into Stroke services in Wales – Written evidence from the Wales Stroke Research Interest Group

Purpose

To highlight the benefits to improvements in stroke services and patient care in Wales which investment in research and development brings

To make the case for further investment in stroke research in Wales

To outline progress capacity building in stroke research in Wales.

Background

The Older People and Ageing Research and Development Network (OPAN Wales) is funded by the Wales Office of Research and Development (WORD) to build a portfolio of research into ageing and stroke. The multidisciplinary OPAN Wales Stroke Research Interest Group comprises stroke professionals, stroke survivors and academics from across Wales.

The OPAN Wales Stroke Research Interest Group is supported by a full time Research Portfolio Development Fellow who has been in post since May 2008. This post is part funded by WORD and relies on matched charitable funding from the UK Stroke Association.

The OPAN Stroke Research Interest Group hosts research development group meetings, organises research seminars and training events and disseminates research, practice and policy developments.

Why does Wales need investment in stroke research?

Stroke research in Wales is under-funded compared to other specialisms in Wales and in comparison with investment in stroke research in other countries of the United Kingdom. For example, following substantial investment from the National Institute for Health Research in 2005, England now benefits from a national stroke research network (SRN) with responsibility to:

Provide a world class infrastructure to support clinical research.

Support and conduct randomised controlled trials and other well designed studies for both commercial and non-commercial sponsors.

Play a key role in promoting the active involvement of patients and the public in research.

Enable research to be conducted across the full spectrum of disease and clinical need through a set of managed clinical networks.

The SRN is supported by a coordinating centre, a number of regional stroke research networks, clinical studies groups, technology and industry adoption committees. Investment was provided to reflect the substantial economic impact of stroke (some £7bn per year in the UK) and reflects the leverage on the quality of service delivery that can be realised through increasing research capacity and the numbers of patients enrolled in high quality studies.

The current Welsh Assembly Inquiry into Stroke Services has received evidence of the high prevalence of strokes and associated long term disability in Wales together with accounts of shortcomings in services from recent national audits of stroke care (The Stroke Association 2009). National Sentinel Audits for Stroke (2007, 2008) concluded that Wales needs to raise the quality of care across the patient pathway. Developing collaborations between research and clinical practice can ensure translation of research findings into improvements in patient care. Clearly, patients in Wales may benefit from research and good practice conducted elsewhere, however, active participation in research can lead to "direct" improvements in patient care, for example, evidence suggests that developing thrombolysis services to participate in a clinical trial has added value for all patients as acute pathways are better configured (National Audit Office 2005).

Stroke was considered to be an under-researched area of health in Wales (Intercollegiate Stroke Working Party 2007). Wales lacks a senior stroke academic appointment and a comprehensive stroke database. Such an appointment together with a supporting research infrastructure would be hugely valuable in informing service developments and research activity.

The OPAN Stroke Research Interest Group's work to support to stroke clinicians in NHS Wales to enhance clinical trials capability is in accordance with the aims of "Designed for Life: A Science Policy for Wales" (WAG 2006). "Clinicians may encounter difficulties in taking part in research activity due to the requirements of NHS contracts. More opportunities should be created for NHS clinical staff to engage in research activity via secondments, research time built into job plans and appraisals.

Building the stroke research infrastructure will make Wales more attractive to research funders including The Stroke Association that has already committed resources to Wales and is interested to sustain its investment.

Aims of OPAN Wales Stroke Research Interest Group

The overarching research priorities of SRIG are to increase stroke research activity in Wales and to:

Provide leadership in stroke research.

Develop a critical mass of researchers with an interest in stroke research.

Support further development of multidisciplinary research into older people and frailty as well as stroke and social care.

Disseminate research programmes, research findings, information and training.

Provide direct links with policy makers and practitioners in ageing as well as stroke survivors and carers.

OPAN Wales Stroke Research Interest Group themes and topics

Reflecting the complexity of the Wales stroke services pathway and research expertise in Wales, SRIG current and future research focuses on:

Primary and secondary stroke prevention

pre-hospital care, emergency and acute stroke management

rehabilitation

living with stroke including depression and anxiety.

To maximise the impact of its research, SRIG structures many of its infrastructure functions across stroke pathway components as cross-cutting themes which include:

applied research

service user involvement

research capacity and capability building

knowledge translation.

Achievements of Wales Stroke Research Interest Group

Since the appointment of the Stroke Research Portfolio Development Fellow (Dr Allison Cooper, seconded from the Gwent NHS Trust), 8 multicentre UKSRN clinical trials have been added to the existing portfolio of 5 studies. UKSRN clinical trials now cover 6 Welsh NHS Trusts. The CRC-Cymru Research Professional Network has supported recruitment to these studies and robust links have been made with UKSRN staff to raise awareness of research activity in Wales and to enhance involvement of Welsh sites in UKSRN studies. Three research funding applications have been successful and a further 3 proposals have been submitted. Members of SRIG are co applicants on UKSRN studies.

Funding and management of OPAN Stroke Research Interest Group

Funding to support OPAN and the Stroke Research Interest Group expires in March 2010. An application for renewed funding 2010 / 15 to support the Stroke Research Portfolio Development Fellow post, together with other OPAN appointments and costs, was submitted to WORD in July 2009 and the outcome is awaited.

The OPAN grant holders are Professor Judith Phillips and Dr Susan Lambert, OPAN Co Directors of Swansea University. The Chair and Vice Chair of SRIG are Dr Hamsaraj Shetty of University Hospital of Wales and Dr Christopher Burton, Bangor University.

Summary and recommendations

Currently stroke research in Wales is under-funded and current initiatives rely on charitable resources.

Building research capacity in Wales is essential to improve patient care.

Enhanced funding is essential to sustain the work of the OPAN Stroke Research Interest Group and for a senior academic appointment to lead stroke research in Wales.

References

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