



The Stroke Director: The Key to Stroke Center Success

For those interested in obtaining stroke center certification, be advised: the leader sets the tone.

Perhaps no other aspect of a stroke program is as important as the choice of the program's medical director. While not obligatory, almost always this role is filled by a neurologist, making it important to weigh the relative pros and cons of a commitment to this position.

A successful program inevitably requires a major time commitment and significant dedication of the director. Although in many programs the director plays only a nominal role (perhaps only to achieve stroke center certification, where it is a requirement), a strong program will almost always require good physician leadership in order to thrive.

Committing to becoming a program director is not a minor matter. The time required is frequently substantially more than anticipated, particularly in the early phases of program development. But even after the program is up and running, there continues to be a large amount of effort required to maintain high quality and performance standards.

When considering whether to take on this task, the most important question is whether you have sufficient time to adequately and appropriately perform the job. In this role, the physician must not only attend innumerable meetings with various parties, but also develop stroke protocols, achieve consensus among physicians and staff, and negotiate with administration. Failure to perform these tasks diligently can result in an unsuccessful program, one that may exist in name only, and that does not have any meaningful impact on medical practice.

A physician may be asked to become a director with the promise that there is "little if any time commitment necessary." Often, there is no financial compensation for the *significant* time commitment required for quality performance. The physician may also feel obligated to help the hospital and "pitch in" or recognize the need for better stroke care at their facility. However, it's important to be realistic about how much interest and effort the physician has for this endeavor. Unrealistic expectations can lead to discontent, and a poorly performing and run program.

Obviously, another important aspect of directorship is leadership skills. While many physicians believe they have such skills, one must be realistic. Dealing with numerous different entities, including staff, other neurologists, other physician specialists, nurses, and administration requires adeptness which may not be a strength of the physician. Often the director is charged with hiring and supervising various personnel, especially nurses and other staff, and perhaps even other physicians, adding to the time commitment needed.

Clinical skills are of course also a necessity, given the nature of the work involved. Often, stroke directors are taken from the ranks of general neurologists. While there is absolutely nothing wrong with this approach, it does place added burden on the neurologist to keep up with the latest research and treatment practices, which can be difficult given the number of new clinical studies and wide range of pertinent issues in the field, many of which are not directly related to neurology, but to other associated fields such as general medicine,

intensive care, hematology, and cardiology to name just a few.

Another uncommonly considered issue is personal and professional liability. Creating a stroke program leads to the expectation of a certain level of function. If this is not achieved, or outcomes are not optimal in the patient's view, this can lead to legal issues. Such issues must be factored into the equation of whether to take on this function. This is particularly pertinent in standard of care issues for stroke especially when other neurologists/physicians care for patients at the same institution.

Finally, there is the issue of reimbursement. Given the necessary commitment of substantial time and effort, it seems obvious that compensation from the hospital(s) benefitting from the program should be provided. The exact amount of compensation depends on the amount of effort expended, and this requires careful consideration. The amount of time taken away from other revenue generating activities, as well as the inconvenience and time involved are also important considerations.

Committing to become a stroke program director is an important decision that should not be made lightly. However, with the right information regarding the important role of this position, the job can lead to both improved care and great clinician satisfaction. However, the choice requires careful thought and assessment of personal and professional skills. **PN**



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