

Blood pressure tests will not Kill!

A STROKE MAY!

Fr Peter Sherred (Ambulance Chaplain Dover)

Dover is fortunate to be home to one of the South East Coast Ambulance Service NHS Trust (SECamb) stations, based off Winchelsea Road, with staff who are on call 365 days of the year.

SECamb, created in July 2006, covers an area of 3600 square miles of Kent, Sussex and Surrey and serves about 4.6 million people. Just over every minute an emergency 999 call is received in one of three emergency dispatch centres and ambulance crews respond to Category A, B or C patients. Category A is for patients who are or may be life-threatened and need timely clinical intervention, B is for those who need urgent face-to-face attention and C is for those who may not require an immediate or urgent response. The Government sets differing target times to reach the appropriate category of patient.

Since its creation the Trust has targeted three high profile medical conditions (Stroke, Cardiac and Trauma) with its innovative practices having real benefits for patient care. Annually an estimated 150,000 people in the United Kingdom have a stroke. It is the third most common cause of death and a leading cause of adult disability but pre-hospital emergency care can make a significant difference to outcomes for patients. The Trust is pioneering the FASTTracking system. This involves identifying stroke victims, notifying the hospital and transporting the

patient under blue lights and sirens to specialist centres. A potentially clot-busting treatment, known as thrombolysis, alongside new treatments, techniques and technology is then available.

What is a stroke? What signs can warn people of their vulnerability and its consequences? The Stroke Association recently rejoined forces with the Rotary International movement to raise awareness of these questions. In Dover, on Stroke Awareness Day, 26th April, the Rotary Club of Dover were based in St Mary's Parish Centre and the South Foreland Rotary Club along with ambulance staff were in the pedestrian precinct. Offering a free blood pressure test, often a good indicator of a cardiovascular problem, they tested about 600 people in six hours.

Usually a stroke occurs when a blood clot blocks the flow of blood to the brain while others may be caused by bleeding in or around the brain from a burst blood vessel. This can cause often irreparable brain damage, leading to long-term disability and, in approximately 25 per cent of cases, death. Strokes can cause permanent or temporary paralysis to one side of the body leading to impairment in speech, balance and the ability to write or read. Recovery can be a long and slow process.

We measure blood pressure in millimetres of mercury (mmHg) and take readings

when the heart beats - the systolic pressure - and when it relaxes - the diastolic pressure. Normal adult blood pressure should be less than 140/90mmHg, with an ideal reading of 120/80mmHg. Above this is considered as high blood pressure - hypertension.

It is important to be aware of the level of one's blood pressure so that GPs can investigate the causes and take tests to enable advice on how to reduce blood pressure thereby preventing a stroke from becoming a reality.

Of course, 'strokes always happen to other people' but the importance of such a test was demonstrated by the results from the Rotary Club of South Foreland's successful teamwork with Dover's ambulance service on the day. They enabled 283 people, including the Town Mayor of Dover, to have their blood pressure tested.

Rotarians worked in relays through the day to direct the public towards the SECamb pre-hospital clinicians all of whom worked from 10.00 - 16.00 'clocking', on average, between them 50 people an hour. (The total number of people would undoubtedly have been higher but two of the clinicians were called to an emergency in the Gala Bingo premises opposite taking them away from blood pressure testing for half an hour or so before the on-call emergency ambulance and crew arrived).

123 males and 160 females were tested and of these 58 became GP referrals and 12 were deemed to be urgent. 3 of these 70 including a 14 year old child were immediately referred to the on call doctor. There was a significant referral rate of 25% of those tested. Further statistics show that 67 people were under 35, 72 between 35

and 55 and 144 over 55. The SECamb team of Jane Brown, John Court, Chris Tully and David Davis were kept busy throughout the day raising public awareness in relation to stroke, blood pressure and cardio vascular disease.

Dick Hubbard, for the Rotary Club of South Foreland, said after the event that we were very grateful for the assistance from SECamb and were delighted with the number of people who showed such an interest. The statistical results serve to remind everybody of the need for regular blood pressure checks and that like death, stroke does not discriminate - **it can affect anyone at any time.**

The day also served to highlight how valuable the ambulance clinician's role is in prevention, helping to combat stroke and its consequences. They use a simple test to establish if someone is having a stroke and is easy to use by anyone. Called the FAST test it involves checking the movement in the face and arms and ascertaining if speech is slurred. An audit in September 2007 showed 94% of 790 stroke cases were correctly assessed with the FAST test.

David Davis for SECamb was full of praise for the day's activities and for the work of paramedics and ambulance technicians and stressed that getting patients to hospital quickly is essential. All 11 acute hospitals in the region now offer stroke thrombolysis services. This compares to the national figure of 12%.

The need for regular blood pressure testing is obvious so having read thus far (and if you have not had a test recently) why not be brave and submit to one - it may save your life.