

Strike Out Stroke

in Atrial Fibrillation

Action for Stroke Prevention

How Can We Avoid a Stroke Crisis?

Working group report and recommendations on stroke prevention in patients with atrial fibrillation

Simple measures could improve stroke prevention in patients with atrial fibrillation (AF) in Europe and thereby help to stop the rising tide of preventable strokes related to AF which occur every year. These strokes lead to thousands of early deaths and have a devastating impact on individuals and society.

Many strokes in people with AF can be prevented. As patients with AF represent a vast population at high risk of stroke, in particular severe stroke, this group is an important target for reducing the overall burden of stroke – identified by the European Heart Health Charter and EU policy as a key need in Europe¹.

Why is action needed?

Six million people in Europe suffer from AF, the most common, sustained abnormal heart rhythm². Individuals with AF have a five-fold increased risk of stroke compared with the general population³. To add to this, AF-related strokes are more severe, cause greater disability and have worse outcomes than strokes in patients without AF⁴.

Stroke is also a vast problem. It is the most common cardiovascular disorder after heart disease, afflicting about 9.6 million people in Europe and killing an estimated 5.7 million people annually worldwide⁵. The current economic burden of stroke is huge, at around €38 billion per annum it accounts for 2-3% of total healthcare expenditure in the European Union (EU)⁶. This burden will increase in years to come, due to both the improved survival of patients with conditions such as heart attacks and Europe's ageing population; the number of new strokes in the EU is predicted to rise from 1.1 million per year in 2000 to 1.5 million by 2025⁷, and the number of people with AF will increase approximately 2.5-fold by 2050^{8,9}.

A call for action to prevent strokes in AF

Action for Stroke Prevention, a group of European health experts, and all those individuals and societies who endorse the recommendations, call on the EU and Member States to take action to ensure the provision of better and earlier detection and management of AF, as well as more effective measures and therapies to prevent AF-related stroke across Europe.

Principal recommendations:

1. Create and raise awareness among national governments and the general public of the impact of AF and AF-related stroke

- ◆ There is a critical need for increased awareness among national governments and the general population of the clinical, economic and social impact of AF and AF-related strokes for better understanding of its causes, and for improvements in strategies for AF detection and management
- ◆ The European Parliament, European Commission and Member States are called upon to drive policy initiatives to prevent AF and strokes in AF patients

2. Develop coordinated strategies for early and adequate diagnosis of AF

- ◆ AF is often only detected after a stroke. However, a simple, inexpensive procedure such as routine pulse-taking followed by electrocardiogram monitoring could play a crucial role in improving detection of AF in at-risk patients
- ◆ Campaigns to increase awareness of the early signs of AF, associated conditions, and the importance of detecting abnormal heart rhythm, could help reduce the need for stroke prevention treatment

3. Improve education of patients and carers about AF and its detection

- ◆ There is an urgent need for the EU and national governments to fund, drive and encourage participation in educational initiatives that provide the public with better information about the risk of AF-related stroke and the methodology for its prevention, including: pharmaceutical and technological interventions such as new anticoagulation drugs and patient-operated monitoring techniques for existing drugs. This could play a significant role in improving adherence to therapy
- ◆ Collection of information across the EU on AF, its diagnosis and management, and stroke prevention in cooperation with leading European health professional and patient organizations would identify best practice for the successful management of AF and lead to national benchmarks to stimulate EU-wide improvements

4. Encourage the development and use of new approaches to the management of AF and the prevention of AF-related stroke

- ◆ Some factors that contribute to the emergence of AF are not modifiable, such as ageing, so it will not be possible to eliminate AF entirely. Effective use of anticoagulation therapy is therefore essential in patients who have already developed AF, in order to prevent complications such as a stroke resulting from a circulating blood clot
- ◆ Enhanced treatment options will ultimately help to lessen the personal, clinical and economic burden of stroke. In addition to implementing adequate use of existing anticoagulation therapies, therapeutic options may be increased by thorough clinical evaluation and use of new anticoagulant drugs¹⁰

5. Improve the awareness of physicians involved in AF management

- ◆ Physician education is needed to help in the recognition of undiagnosed AF before complications occur. Patients should fully understand the management options for AF and recognise that when implemented according to guidelines, the benefits of therapy outweigh the risks
- ◆ Coordinated EU efforts are needed to initiate appropriate physician education and awareness strategies

6. Promote equity of access to therapy, monitoring services and information for all patients across the EU

- ◆ All patients should have equal and timely access to diagnostic procedures to identify AF; adequate therapies to manage arrhythmia; anticoagulation therapy for prevention of stroke; and better information on AF and its consequences
- ◆ Clear and relevant information to patients is needed to ensure they are actively involved in determining their care, regardless of which country they live in

7. Strongly advocate adherence to guidelines for the management of patients with AF

- ◆ There is a need across much of Europe to improve adherence to existing guidelines on the prevention of stroke in patients with AF, as non-adherence is associated with poor outcomes¹¹. This would enhance patient safety in line with a recent European Commission communication on patient safety^{12,13}
- ◆ There is a need for the EU to raise awareness of guidelines and the fact that adherence to these recommendations will reduce the number of new cases of AF-related stroke

8. Facilitate exchange of best practice between Member States

- ◆ An EU initiative to support the existing process of harmonising therapeutic guidelines into one set of unified European guidelines would help to further the goal of stroke prevention
- ◆ Better alignment between Member States, to identify areas where guidance is overlooked or where agreement is required on divergent advice

9. Boost research into the causes, prevention and management of AF

- ◆ Funding is required to boost basic and clinical research into increasing our understanding of the causes of AF, and of developing strategies for the prevention and treatment of AF-related stroke. By 2050 the number of people over 65 in the EU is expected to grow by 70%, underscoring the importance of increasing our understanding and developing strategies for prevention and treatment¹⁴

About Action for Stroke Prevention

Action for Stroke Prevention is a group of health experts from across Europe who have come together to call for urgent co-ordinated action from EU policy makers and member state governments to prevent a European stroke epidemic and improve the future health of people across Europe.

The group comprises cardiologists, neurologists, primary care practitioners, patient representatives, policy makers and a health economist. Their report, *How Can We Avoid a Stroke Crisis?*, and recommendations are endorsed by 17 leading European medical professional and patient organisations.

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