Problems and benefits reported by stroke family caregivers: results from a prospective epidemiological study.

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Authors Haley, WE, Allen, JY, Grant, JS, Clay, OJ, Perkins, M, Roth, DL
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Abstract

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE: Stroke symptoms can be very stressful for family caregivers, but most knowledge about the prevalence and stressfulness of stroke-related patient problems is derived from convenience samples. In addition, little is known about perceived benefits of the stroke caregiving experience. The purpose of this study was to determine the prevalence and stressfulness of stroke-related problems, and perceived benefits of caregiving, as reported by an epidemiologically derived sample of caregivers of stroke survivors.

METHODS: Stroke survivors (N=75) from a prospective epidemiological study of stroke, the REasons for Geographic and Racial Differences in Stroke (REGARDS) study, and their family caregivers were followed. Caregivers were given a comprehensive telephone interview 8 to 12 months after the stroke, using measures of stroke patient problems, caregiver appraisals of the stressfulness of these problems, and perceived benefits of caregiving.

RESULTS: Caregivers rated patient problems with mood (depression, loneliness and anxiety), memory, and physical care (bowel control), as the most stressful, but reported prevalence of these problems was lower than those reported previously in studies using clinical samples. Caregivers also reported many benefits from caregiving, with over 90% reporting that
caregiving enabled them to appreciate life more.

CONCLUSIONS: Epidemiologically based studies of stroke caregiving provide a unique picture of caregiver strains and benefits compared with clinical studies, which tend to over-represent more impaired patients. Support for caregivers should include interventions to aid their coping with highly stressful mood, physical care, and cognitive problems of stroke patients, but should also attend to perceived benefits of caregiving.

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