Views of stroke patients on physical fitness training

SIR—Physical fitness is a set of attributes which people have or achieve, which relates to their ability to perform physical activity without fatigue. Physical fitness is typically increased by activity, and decreased by inactivity. After stroke, physical fitness declines for a variety of reasons—such as a non-specific reduction in mobility. If physical fitness could be improved, this might reduce stroke-related disability. Observational data suggest that physical fitness training after stroke may improve disability [1], but these benefits need to be confirmed or refuted by randomized trials before physical training should be incorporated into stroke rehabilitation.

The feasibility of a randomized trial is dependent, at least in part, upon the attitudes of stroke patients to physical fitness training. We therefore interviewed 40 inpatients with stroke (but without clinically significant dysphasia or confusion), in order to determine which factors would motivate or deter them from participating in a programme of physical fitness training. Over 70% of patients stated that the major motivating factors were ‘if the doctor told me’, ‘exercise is good for health’ and ‘to become fitter’. This contrasts with baseline data from a community-based study of older people, where ‘the doctor told me to’ was not important as a motivator [2]. In our study, the most important barriers were ‘too tired’ and ‘poor health’. Sixty-five percent of stroke patients stated that they would be interested in participating in physical fitness training.

Our data suggest that doctors may have some influence over whether or not patients participate in physical exercise. Further work could usefully be done to investigate the mechanisms of ‘tiredness’ post-stroke. We are now investigating the practicalities of a randomized trial of physical fitness training after stroke.

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