



October: Stroke Awareness Month
(A collaboration between the Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa and the Angels Initiative)

Awareness and acting quickly are keys to preventing and surviving a stroke

Strokes are a medical emergency. Up to 360 South Africans a day are affected by strokes and experts warn that about a third of those who have a stroke will die, and a quarter will be left with life-changing disability.

October is Stroke Awareness Month, and the novel Angels Initiative and the Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa are mobilising healthcare institutions and service providers, survivor support groups and other partners to improve public awareness of stroke and how the negative consequences of the condition can be mitigated.

Stroke is essentially a 'brain attack'. The supply of blood and oxygen to the brain can be cut off because of a blockage or damage to a blood vessel in the brain. This causes the brain cells to die, which can be fatal or result in disability.

"Many factors complicate South Africa's response to stroke," says Professor Pamela Naidoo, the CEO of the Heart and Stroke Foundation: "High blood pressure, smoking, diet rich in fatty foods and sugary drinks and insufficient exercise describe the lifestyle of too many South Africans – and make us more at risk of stroke. When a stroke strikes, poor patient awareness of symptoms and inadequate access to fast medical help make survival and recovery less likely."

The Angels Initiative, introduced to South Africa last year by Boehringer Ingelheim, has a two-fold aim. The first is to increase stroke awareness and education across diverse communities in order to reach the population at large. The second is to provide best practice guidelines, training and equipment, standardising the availability and quality of stroke-readiness and care within South Africa's hospitals.

Dr Shanil Naidoo, Medical Director of Boehringer Ingelheim South Africa, says: "Many stroke patients can be saved and go on to live lives free from disability if they receive appropriate care in a stroke-ready facility."

The October awareness campaign will highlight simple facts that can save numerous lives. Many strokes can be reversed if blood flow to the brain is restored before the brain tissue dies. Everyone

should know the FAST test that enables easy recognition of possible stroke symptoms – and if needed, they should get to their closest appropriate emergency department as quickly as possible.

The best treatment is prevention

The majority of strokes can be avoided by healthy living and management of health risks. You may know about the risks of high blood pressure, smoking, obesity, inactivity, and diabetes. But what about **atrial fibrillation**? Many of us would describe atrial fibrillation as heart palpitations or an irregular heartbeat. There are many causes and different ways of managing atrial fibrillation. But it needs professional attention because, if ignored, it could lead to a stroke.

Can strokes be treated? If so – how?

Strokes always cause brain damage. Whether this is slight, severe or fatal depends how serious the stroke is and how quickly treatment occurs.

When a stroke is caused by **blockage**, medication can dissolve the blood clot causing the obstruction or a tiny instrument, guided through the system of arteries, can extract the clot.

When the stroke is caused by a **bleed**, the damaged artery can be surgically repaired or reinforced to stop bleeding. In some cases, sustained physiotherapy and occupational therapy can help reduce disability caused by damage to the brain.

Do the FAST test

If you suspect a stroke, ask the person to:

Face: Smile or show their teeth. Does one side droop?

Arm: Raise both arms. Does one arm drift down?

Speech: Repeat any sentence. Is there trouble speaking or understanding?

Time: Time saved is brain function saved. Every minute counts in accessing care.

For Media Queries and Interviews with Professor Naidoo, her team and members of the AngelsInitiative, please contact Ms Nuraan Cader on 021 422 1586 / email: nuraan.cader@heartfoundation.co.za with Prof Naidoo in copy: email: pamela.naidoo@heartfoundation.co.za

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About the Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa (HSFSA)

The HSFSA is a registered non-profit-organization, NPO number: 032-326-NPO. The Foundation leads in disseminating knowledge, awareness and prevention of heart disease and stroke by encouraging the public to adopt less risky health behaviours. The Foundation is also involved in influencing health policy and advocacy as part of a civil society voice. The HSFSA works with the National Department of Health and other relevant stakeholders to promote health and prevent CVDs. For more information please visit: www.heartfoundation.co.za, [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#).

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