Humans have the greatest capacity for foresight but the least inclination to use it. Although 35% of Americans say that they or someone close to them have had a stroke, only 1% worry about it. The statistics resulted from a telephone survey of 1000 adults representative of the US demographics conducted by the American Heart Association. Moreover, only a minority know what to do to prevent a stroke. When asked what was the most important thing that they could do to prevent stroke, 23% answered controlling high blood pressure, 18% said exercising regularly, and 17% mentioned eating healthy. Most distressing of all, 73% of respondents with stroke experience said that their doctors had not discussed risk factors with them.

The situation is not much better elsewhere in the world. A survey of an urban population in Australia showed that 39.4% identified smoking and 33.7% named stress as risk factors for stroke. The good news, however, is that educational campaigns work. A survey conducted in Germany established that only 8% of participants knew that paralysis was a manifestation of stroke. Similarly, only 4% recognized that speech problems could be a symptom of stroke. However, a repeat survey 10 months later, after an awareness campaign, increased the realization to 22% and 14%, respectively, that paralysis and speech problems portend stroke (O.P.J. Busse, MD, et al, unpublished data, 2002). Similarly, continuous television advertising over 46 weeks in Canada raised the awareness of 2 or more warning symptoms of stroke, from 36% to 62%.

May is American Stroke Month and a good opportunity to share information that leads to action. Health professionals can access information at www.americanstroke.org, and patients can call 1-888-4-STROKE. Only increasing awareness among health professionals, policy-makers, and the public can begin to close the huge gap between knowledge and practice.

References
Awareness: The First Step to Action
Vladimir Hachinski

Stroke. 2002;33:1173
doi: 10.1161/01.STR.000014586.17714.BC
Stroke is published by the American Heart Association, 7272 Greenville Avenue, Dallas, TX 75231
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Print ISSN: 0039-2499. Online ISSN: 1524-4628

The online version of this article, along with updated information and services, is located on the
World Wide Web at:
http://stroke.ahajournals.org/content/33/5/1173

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