

Regional Intervention of Stroke Care to Increase Thrombolytic Therapy for Acute Ischemic Stroke The Southeast Texas Experience

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Background and Purpose—The aims of this study were to investigate the effect of an intervention to unblind data on r-tPA (recombinant tissue-type plasminogen activator) administration and sharing data with chief executive officers of participating hospitals, on r-tPA administration rates postintervention and on potential healthcare cost savings implemented at 26 Southeast Texas Regional Advisory Council hospitals.

Methods—Retrospective analysis of prospective data on thrombolytic therapy from 26 Southeast Texas Regional Advisory Council hospitals, collected between April 2014 and June 2016. The control (blinded) period (Q2-2014 to Q2-2015) was followed by unblinding (Q3-2015).

Results—Intervention was associated with 21.1% increase in r-tPA administration rates, with 38.5% increase in r-tPA administration with door-to-needle time ≤ 60 minutes. An absolute increase in r-tPA administration of 2.1% was seen with an average lifetime cost savings of \$3.6 million.

Conclusions—Transparent regional data sharing was associated with improved r-tPA administration and healthcare cost savings. (*Stroke*. 2018;49:00-00. DOI: 10.1161/STROKEAHA.118.021109.)

Key Words: cost savings ■ hospitals ■ prospective studies ■ retrospective studies ■ stroke, acute ■ thrombolytic therapy

Acute ischemic stroke (AIS) is a neurological emergency that carries significant morbidity and mortality, with improvement in clinical outcomes demonstrated by r-tPA (recombinant tissue-type plasminogen activator) administration ≤ 4.5 hours after symptom onset. Patients treated within 90 minutes from symptom onset have an increased likelihood of favorable 90-day outcomes compared with those treated later.^{1,2} Even though 25% of all patients with AIS are eligible for intravenous thrombolysis, only 7% of them receive this treatment in the United States.³ Current efforts focus on increasing r-tPA administration rates and reducing treatment delays or door-to-needle times (DTN). The American Stroke Association launched the Target Stroke initiative with the goal of improving DTN times.⁴ Recent analyses of the Get With The Guidelines-Stroke database show that $<60\%$ of patients receive r-tPA within 60 minutes.⁵ Delays in r-tPA administration are associated with higher odds of mortality and higher rates of symptomatic intracerebral hemorrhage.⁵

AIS is also associated with significant cost to the US healthcare system. The mean lifetime cost of AIS in the United

States is estimated at \$140048, which includes costs of inpatient care, rehabilitation, and follow-up.⁶ The average lifetime cost saving of r-tPA administration for AIS is \$25 000 (95% CI, $-\$11\,000$ to $-\$42\,000$) per patient.⁷ Increasing the rates of r-tPA administration can decrease acute stroke morbidity and healthcare expenditure.

The Southeast Texas Regional Advisory Council (SETRAC) is 1 of 22 regional advisory councils currently functioning within the state of Texas. SETRAC coordinates emergency providers to ensure efficient and consistent care of each individual who experiences acute injury, including stroke. Hospitals treating patients with AIS within SETRAC voluntarily provide quarterly data on patient demographics, modes of transportation, treatment with r-tPA, and time to treatment. The SETRAC stroke committee reviews the blinded data periodically and recommends improvement of care provided to patients with AIS. One recommendation was the unblinding of data regarding r-tPA administration rates to chief executive officers (CEOs) of participating institutions. This study aims to investigate the effect of the SETRAC recommendation

Received January 8, 2018; final revision received June 4, 2018; accepted June 12, 2018.

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The online-only Data Supplement is available with this article at <http://stroke.ahajournals.org/lookup/suppl/doi:10.1161/STROKEAHA.118.021109/-/DC1>.

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Stroke is available at <http://stroke.ahajournals.org>

DOI: 10.1161/STROKEAHA.118.021109

to share data with CEOs of participating hospitals on r-tPA administration rates and potential healthcare cost savings.

Methods

Study Population

We performed a retrospective analysis of prospectively collected data from 26 hospitals participating in the SETRAC stroke committee. All patients discharged with a diagnosis of AIS, who received thrombolytic therapy with r-tPA between April 2014 and June 2016, were included in the study. The study was approved with a waiver of consent by the Institutional Review Board of the Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, TX. The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Intervention

Data collection started in April 2014. During the first quarters of data review (control period from Q2-2014 to Q2-2015), the CEOs of participating hospitals received a quarterly report indicating the rates of patients treated with r-tPA at each institution in a blinded fashion except for identification of their program. In Q3-2015, decision was made to unblind names of all participating institutions that allowed CEOs to know which hospitals in the SETRAC region were treating patients with AIS and their corresponding rates of r-tPA use. The SETRAC Stroke Committee's intention was to provide participating hospitals with an incentive to improve performance in r-tPA administration. CEOs were encouraged to implement programs to increase awareness of AIS, including time-dependent interventions among healthcare professionals, such as emergency physicians and nurses; specifics of program can be found in the [online-only Data Supplement](#).

Statistical Analysis

Variables are summarized as means±SD. All variables were tested for normality before further analyses. A Panel Poisson model was used to analyze effect of intervention during a period of 9 quarters. Given high within variance, a fixed effects model was chosen. Baseline demographics, including mean age, sex, race, and ethnicity, were collected along with the number of AIS and r-tPA administration rate (≤60 minutes DTN and >60 minutes DTN). Data collected from initial 5 quarters represent the control period and the next 4 quarters represent the intervention period. We compared change in r-tPA administration rate from control period to intervention period, and this was dichotomized between DTN ≤60 minutes and DTN >60 minutes. Univariate and multivariate analyses were performed. Statistical analysis was performed using Stata, version 14 (Stata Corp LLC, College Station, TX).

Results

Between April 2014 and June 2016 (total of 9 quarters), a total of 18341 patients were discharged from 26 SETRAC facilities with a diagnosis of stroke. Among them, 14675 (79.2%) were diagnosed with AIS. A total of 2218 (15.1%) patients received r-tPA; among them, 1707 (76.9%) patients received r-tPA at the SETRAC facility, whereas 511 (23.1%) received r-tPA at an outside hospital before transfer to a SETRAC facility. A DTN time of ≤60 minutes after emergency room arrival, among all facilities, was achieved in 1024 patients (median, 59.63%). Baseline characteristics and demographics in preintervention and postintervention period were similar (Table 1).

A univariate analysis showed that intervention was associated with significantly higher number of r-tPA administration rates with incident rate ratio 1.21 (95% CI, 1.07–1.37;

Table 1. Baseline Characteristics

	All	Control Period	Intervention Period	P Value
No. of ischemic strokes, n	14675	8068	6608	0.83
Sex: male, %	48.9	46.4	47.4	0.49
Mean age, y; mean (SD)	67.7 (5.60)	67.0 (3.99)	68.5 (6.93)	0.54
Race, %				
White	37.2	39.0	36.2	0.51
Black	16.0	16.6	15.4	0.95
Ethnicity: Hispanic, %				
	11.2	10.2	12.3	0.35

$P=0.002$), furthermost benefit was seen in r-tPA administration with DTN ≤60 minutes incident rate ratio 1.38 (CI, 1.11–1.71; $P=0.003$). This statistically significant trend continued on multivariate logistical regression model after controlling for age, sex, ethnicity, and number of ischemic strokes (Table 2).

The intervention was associated with a 21.2% ($P=0.002$; mean absolute, 2.1% from 10.7% to 12.8%) increase in r-tPA administration with the most effect seen in r-tPA administration with DTN ≤60 minutes—an increase by 38.5% ($P=0.003$). In other words, intervention increased the total number of r-tPA administration by increasing a more favorable administration pattern of DTN ≤60 minutes.

To analyze effect of healthcare cost saving from intervention, we analyzed the increased number of patients who would have received r-tPA from intervention. The absolute increase in r-tPA administration rate adjusting for number of quarters would translate into 147 patients who got r-tPA who otherwise would not have received it if it were not for

Table 2. Univariate and Multivariate Analysis Predictors of r-tPA Administered

	IRR (95% CI)	P Value
r-tPA		
Male patients, %	0.87 (0.48–1.56)	0.64
Mean age, y	0.99 (0.97–1.01)	0.45
White patients, %	0.99 (0.99–1.00)	0.45
Hispanic patients, %	1.00 (0.99–1.01)	0.577
No. of ischemic strokes	1.002 (1.0007–1.004)	0.005
Intervention	1.21 (1.07–1.37)	0.002
r-tPA (DTN ≤60 min)		
Male patients, %	0.71 (0.31–1.64)	0.43
Mean age, y	0.99 (0.96–1.02)	0.73
White patients, %	0.99 (0.99–1.003)	0.34
Hispanic patients, %	1.01 (0.99–1.04)	0.18
No. of ischemic strokes	0.003 (0.0007–0.005)	0.009
Intervention	1.38 (1.11–1.71)	0.003

DTN indicates door-to-needle time; IRR, incident rate ratio; and r-tPA, recombinant tissue-type plasminogen activator.

intervention. r-tPA administration was associated with average lifetime cost saving of \$25 000 (95% CI, −\$11 000 to −\$42 000) per patient.⁷ Extrapolating those numbers to our study would result in an average cost saving of \$3.6 million (\$1.6 to \$6.1 million).

Discussion

Our data suggest that the intervention resulted in an increase in r-tPA administration within the first 60 minutes of hospital arrival by 38.5% and an increase in total r-tPA administration by 21.2% among SETRAC hospitals. Healthcare cost savings resulting from increased r-tPA utilization rates secondary to the intervention resulted in savings of >\$3.67 million during 4 quarters of intervention period. This reflects significant improvement in patient care and healthcare spending with a simple, novel, noninvasive, and easy-to-implement intervention.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Our study has several strengths. Our data include information of all patients with AIS admitted to the SETRAC region. The data fields are similar to those validated by the Get With The Guidelines-Stroke database. The study intervention represents a simple instrument that should be applicable to other regions in the United States and possibly in other countries. Inability to control for unidentified confounding factors because of retrospective analysis is a limitation of the study.

Implications of Our Study

Only fraction of eligible patients with AIS receive r-tPA³; although various individual variables have been identified⁸ as rate-limiting factors for r-tPA administration and achieving DTN ≤60 minutes, few studies address the need of overcoming limiting factors at institutional level.⁹ Our study is unique because it addresses this limiting block. Our intervention is designed to increase transparency among hospitals in region at the highest administrative level. This simple strategy translates to improvement at hospital level and entire regional care. This is reflected by SETRAC hospital rates of r-tPA administration and DTN ≤60 minutes rate when compared with national average.

Conclusions

A larger prospective study is needed to further confirm the effectiveness of such novel intervention. However, we can infer that regional intervention for stroke systems of care, data sharing, and a simple intervention of providing feedback to hospital administrators can increase r-tPA administration rates for AIS.

Acknowledgments

Statistical analysis was done by P. Asgarisabet.

Disclosures

None.

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Stroke. published online July 10, 2018;
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

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SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Supplement 1. Hospital-level interventions to improve intravenous thrombolysis **System wide interventions performed in all SETRAC hospitals**

- Performance data was reported to individual CEO's of SETRAC hospitals in the form of a CEO report, updating them on how their stroke program compared to other hospitals in the same area.
- Performance data was then un-blinded and each hospital and EMS service was able to see how they performed relative to others.
- This data sharing prompted groups to analyze their program and to determine the potential opportunities for improvement.
- Color coding of the reasons for not administering intravenous tissue plasminogen activator (tPA) to eligible patients, and sharing them across hospitals to enable physicians to consider the administration of intravenous tPA more thoroughly.

Hospital Level interventions performed:

- The creation of one phone number to call for any Neuro issue facility-wide, named 'Neuro1'. The caller gives the call taker a priority number so the physician was informed of the type of request being called in, and how so they needed to call back.
Code 1 = Code Stroke (call back in 10 mins or less)
Code 2 = Urgent Consult (call back in 10 mins or less)
Code 3 = Non-Urgent (call back within 30 mins)
Code 4 = Routine Floor Consult (no call back time requirement).
This intervention drastically cut down the physician-patient contact time. The Neurologist could triage calls better, as to how soon they needed to call back.
- Education aimed at ED staff, registration and triage staff in the 'BE-FAST' acronym rather than 'FAST'. Using the acronym BE-FAST (Balance, Eyes, Face, Arms, Speech and Time), enabled better identification of posterior circulation strokes.
- Encouraging the emergency physicians and neurologists to treat patients with potentially disabling acute stroke symptoms with thrombolysis, even if the NIH stroke scale was low or zero. Genentech representatives also helped with this education effort.
- Door to CT for stroke patients was hardwired. Triage or EMS nurses and physicians could call a Code Stroke. This was announced overhead and the ED physician and Neurologist on call reported to CT scan, along with ED charge nurse and stroke coordinator.
- Implementation of a standardized process for Code Strokes. Code Stroke drills were conducted with ED, CT and lab. The pathway was printed and everyone had access to it.
- The goal for door to needle (DTN) times was set at 30 minutes or less. This was reviewed at ED staff meetings and discussed during monthly stroke committee meetings. DTN times were tracked and posted in the emergency room and CT scan areas.
- Feedback pertaining to intravenous tPA cases were shared with ED and EMS personnel. These cases were also reviewed during stroke committee meetings to discuss ways for improvement.
- Code Stroke eligibility criteria was increased from 4.5 hrs to 24 hrs. This increased the treatment window for more patients to benefit from advanced stroke care.
- Administration of tPA was moved from the emergency room to the CT suite. Patients stayed in CT suite until intravenous tPA decision making was complete, and patients were evaluated for candidacy for IAT.
- Emergency departments and staff from hospitals that had a low DTN time were provided recognition.
- Appointment of an ED pharmacist to help with Code Stroke during the day. The ED pharmacist could teach tPA competency to other staff.
- While the Neurologist reviewed the initial non-contrast CT scan ahead of decision making towards intravenous tPA, the CT technician was charged with loading the CT contrast into the injector. Once the tPA bolus was administered and the infusion was started, a second IV line was used to perform CT-Angiography and/or perfusion.

- A Stroke Coordinator responded to all Code Strokes when at the facility. They were able to educate and redirect teams if they go off the designated stroke pathway. They were also able to identify issues and trends during Code Strokes and report them to the Stroke Committee.
- Process improvement in the hospital laboratory, to have a separate centrifuge dedicated to Code Strokes. This enabled a 20-minute report time for STAT INR labs.
- EMS Outreach – Physicians visited EMS stations and trained EMS in identifying Large Vessel Occlusions (LVO).
- IV-tPA was stocked in the CT Pyxis with 3 more vials in the ED as back-up.