Melrose-Wakefield Hospital has received the Get With The Guidelines®-Stroke Gold Plus Quality Achievement Award from the American Heart Association/American Stroke Association. The award recognizes the hospital’s commitment and success in ensuring stroke patients receive the most appropriate treatment according to nationally recognized guidelines based on the latest scientific evidence.

“Our participation in Get With The Guidelines demonstrates our commitment to quality care,” said Barbara Marullo, BSN, RN, stroke coordinator, Hallmark Health. “We are dedicated to providing appropriate care quickly and safely to help our patients achieve the best possible outcomes.”

Hospitals must achieve 85 percent or higher adherence to the seven Get With The Guidelines-Stroke Achievement Measures and achieve 75 percent or higher compliance with five of eight Get With The Guidelines-Stroke Quality Measures to receive the Gold Plus Quality Achievement Award.

These measures help hospital teams apply the most up-to-date, evidence-based guidelines with the goals of speeding recovery and reducing death and disability for stroke patients. The measures focus on appropriate use of guideline-based care, which includes aggressive use of medications such as clot-busting and anti-clotting drugs, blood thinners, and cholesterol-reducing drugs; taking preventive action for deep vein thrombosis; and providing smoking cessation counseling.

“Our goal is to ensure that all patients being treated for stroke receive all of the recommended care,” said Alec Walker, MD, MBA, chair of the Department of Emergency Medicine.

Melrose-Wakefield Hospital and Lawrence Memorial Hospital of Medford are also designated by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health as Primary Stroke Service hospitals. The designation requires hospitals to follow specific protocols for patient assessment and care, and to commit to continuous education of the public about warning signs and symptoms of stroke. The hospitals’ multidisciplinary team provides emergency diagnostic and therapeutic services 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to patients with symptoms of acute stroke.

Streamlining stroke evaluation and treatment

The Hallmark Health stroke team, supported by the stroke committee and the Quality and Performance Improvement Department, launched a Code Stroke improvement project last year that incorporates process improvement tools to streamline the evaluation and treatment of strokes.

“Exciting advancements have been made that can significantly improve outcomes for stroke patients,” said Alec Walker, MD, MBA, chair of the Department of Emergency Medicine. “But there is a finite window of time in which the clot-busting medication called tissue plasminogen activator (tPA) – which is used to potentially reverse permanent effects of stroke – can be administered safely and effectively.”

Because time is of the essence, Hallmark Health’s stroke team is educating the public about the importance of calling 911 when symptoms first appear and is streamlining the complex series of steps required to evaluate stroke patients and determine if tPA is the appropriate treatment. “We had a strong stroke response to begin with,” said Michelle Corrado, PharmD, MHA, chief pharmacy officer. “Standardizing what we do as a team strengthens our shared focus on the patient and makes care more efficient.”

With a goal of administering tPA to appropriate patients within 60 minutes or less of their arrival in the ED, the team set specific goals, including completing a stroke scale assessment and dysphagia screening for all patients presenting with stroke, getting patients to CT scan in 20 minutes or less, and having CT scans read in under 45 minutes.

(continued)
They also mapped out every step required from the time 911 is called to the time tPA is administered. Team members from the ED, pharmacy and imaging formed subgroups to map workflows in their individual areas and implement process improvements. Dr. Walker works with emergency responders, as well, and the hospitals now call a Code Stroke via overhead page to alert everyone who needs to respond.

“Multiple departments and disciplines need to collaborate quickly,” said Barbara Marullo, BSN, RN, stroke coordinator, Hallmark Health. “Clearly defining responsibilities and timeframes helps us prepare for a patient’s arrival and treat them as quickly as possible.”

A well-orchestrated team approach and excellent communication are essential to treating the patient effectively, including efficiently executing key steps in the process. They include emergency responders notifying the hospital en route; calling a Code Stroke; conducting a baseline evaluation and a standard series of tests; performing a head CT; completing dysphagia screening; preparing and delivering medication; coordinating a neurology consult; and administering clot-busting medication when appropriate.

Similar efforts are ongoing to address inpatient needs for emergency stroke care. “Everyone has a slice of the pie,” Dr. Walker said. “Every person at each point of care, including the unit secretary; triage, charge and staff nurses; hospitalists; emergency responders; pharmacy staff; CT staff; ED physicians; neurologists; physician assistants; physical therapists and speech-language pathologists who evaluate possible loss of function and safety issues; nursing education staff; performance improvement staff; and hospital leadership.”

Through their quality and performance improvement initiatives, the team continues to enhance the efficiency with which stroke patients are evaluated and treated, tighten the timeframe from arrival to medication administration, and establish standardized systems that support seamless communication among team members from multiple disciplines.

Dysphagia screening decreases risk of complications

Patients are at increased risk of dysphagia, or trouble swallowing, following a neurologic event such as stroke. Dysphagia can lead to serious conditions such as respiratory distress and aspiration pneumonia caused by foods, liquids or medications being inhaled into the lungs.

“Timely screening for dysphagia is an important element of stroke care,” said Rachel Robertson, MS, CCC-SLP, speech-language pathology coordinator and member of the stroke committee at Hallmark Health. “We can prevent serious complications by identifying swallowing issues quickly and putting precautions in place.”

Speech-language pathology staff is engaged in ongoing initiatives with Hallmark Health colleagues to ensure that all at-risk patients are screened. “We collaborate with staff on the inpatient units and in the emergency departments to raise awareness of the prevalence of dysphagia and the need for screening in neurologically impaired patients,” said Robertson. “We’ve also worked with information technology to build dysphagia-related protocols into the Meditech electronic documentation system.”

Patients who present with symptoms of stroke or other neurologic event are screened by nursing staff at the point of care with the three-ounce water swallow test. Patients who cough, choke or develop a wet tone to their voices during or immediately following the test are further evaluated by speech-language pathology staff, who continue to monitor and treat patients until they are no longer at risk for aspiration.

Lawrence Memorial Hospital of Medford recently was recognized with an award from the Paul Coverdell National Acute Stroke Program at the Massachusetts Department of Public Health for completing dysphagia screenings on 90 percent or more of stroke patients in 2016. The program is a quality improvement collaborative administered by the DPH that supports Primary Stroke Service hospitals and is funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

“The Coverdell Award reflects everyone’s commitment to providing high-quality care, applying evidence-based practices, and keeping patients safe,” Robertson said. “Our goal is to complete screenings on 100 percent of patients at risk for dysphagia.”

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**Dysphagia**

Dysphagia is an important element of stroke care. Early identification helps prevent serious complications and allows for timely intervention.

**McDonald’s Manager**

“McDonald’s is a great place to learn. We value diversity and are committed to providing a welcoming and inclusive environment.”

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*Dysphagia screening decreases risk of complications*

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**Lawrence Memorial Hospital of Medford**

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*SafetyCounts is published by the Hallmark Health Culture of Safety Leadership Committee:*

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