



Question #29:

Re: Recovery

Q 2 months ago my mother, age 78, had a very severe stroke. She went to Jamaica Hospital in Queens. This happened a night after she had a suspected TIA and was released from the same hospital; she just walked out in the afternoon, and had to go back that night, and she could not walk or move her arm.

After spending some time in the stroke unit she was transferred to Trump Pavilion where she has been undergoing rehab therapy since that time. I am afraid that there has not been much improvement. Her left arm is still without movement, and all she can do with her lower left extremity is flex her foot slightly.

After 8 weeks, with very slow progress, and not much improvement, what do you think the chances are of her ever regaining some of her movement in her arm or leg? At her age, I am sure that they cannot be so aggressive with her therapy, and it makes it difficult to help her improve, assuming the stroke wasn't so bad in the first place that she can have improvement.

Answered by:

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Answer:

A Improvement after stroke has been a steadily evolving concept for quite a few years. The traditional teaching has been that the vast majority of improvement after stroke occurs in the first three months, following which minimal improvement generally occurs. In the last 10 years, however, several studies have shown that improvement may occur after stroke even in the chronic phase, meaning years after the stroke has occurred. This late improvement does not seem to occur spontaneously, but is associated with intensive and frequent physical therapy. This really means that forcing the use of a weak limb repeatedly, can result in dramatic and unexpected changes in function. Although the studies that were published showed that this was in the context of ongoing physical therapy, common sense would say that one should be able to obtain the same result through frequent exercise at home or in other settings. Once again, this is dependent on frequent and intensive movement of the affected limb, arm or leg. The fact that the patient is 78 years old should not preclude this kind of effort. Aside from all of this, if she is

still within the three-month time window (about two months) perhaps there will still be some "spontaneous" improvement. While it's possible that there will be no further improvement, in these situations I always tell my patients that it's worth remaining optimistic. This is realistic, and also helps to maintain high spirits which may motivate the person to work a bit harder with regular exercise, and perhaps help avoid depression. I wish that I could be more definitive, but I definitely believe that it's worth remaining optimistic.