Predictors of quality of life 1 year after minor stroke or TIA: a prospective single-centre cohort study

Ka-Hoo Lam  , Emma Blom  , Vincent I H Kwa

ABSTRACT

Objectives In patients after a transient ischaemic attack (TIA) or minor stroke, dysfunction is often underestimated by clinical measures due to invisible symptoms, including cognitive and emotional problems. Many of these patients need stroke care programme, but others do not. In this study, we aim to identify potential predictors of quality of life (QoL) in patients with TIA or minor stroke 1 year poststroke to be able to select which of these patients will need aftercare.

Setting Single-centre hospital in the Netherlands.

Participants 120 patients, diagnosed with TIA or minor stroke and discharged without rehabilitation treatment, completed the study.

Primary and secondary outcome measures QoL (RAND-36), anxiety and depressive symptoms (Hospital Anxiety and Depression scale), the degree of disability or functional dependence after stroke (modified Rankin Scale (mRS)) and symptoms of anxiety and depression specific to stroke (SSADQ) were assessed at baseline (2–6 weeks poststroke) and compared with follow-up at 1 year poststroke.

Results Depression (β=-1.35, p<0.001) and anxiety (β=-0.57, p=0.041) at baseline predicted a worse mental component of QoL after 1 year. Depression (β=-1.100, p<0.001) at baseline, but also age (β=-0.261, p=0.002) and female sex (β=4.101, p=0.034) predicted a worse physical component of QoL after 1 year.

Conclusion With the identification of these predictors, we might be able to select more efficiently and timely the patients with TIA or minor stroke who need stroke aftercare.

INTRODUCTION

Although mortality rates have declined, the incidence of ischaemic stroke has remained stable or even increased slightly. As a consequence of stroke, many patients experience persistent deficits and reduced functional independence. According to a recent report from the Global Burden of Disease (GBD) 2016 Lifetime Risk of Stroke Collaborators, cerebrovascular disease ranks second in leading causes of disability-adjusted life years globally, with the burden of disease increasing proportionally to age and in the more developed regions. Based on severity and duration, ischaemic stroke can be classified as major and minor stroke and transient ischaemic attack (TIA).

Patients with major stroke and severe debilitating symptoms usually receive further rehabilitation treatment. In contrast, full recovery is assumed in patients with minor stroke or TIA, and these ‘walking and talking’ patients are discharged home from the hospital without rehabilitation. However, previous studies found that a substantial proportion of these patients do suffer from invisible symptoms, including cognitive and emotional problems. When assessment only includes clinical measures such as the modified Rankin Scale (mRS), these problems can easily be overlooked. Nevertheless, these complaints can be a major contributor to poor quality of life (QoL). In the past few years, this problem has been addressed by the introduction of many outpatient stroke care programmes targeting patients with minor stroke or TIA. Evidence is accumulating that these outpatient stroke care programmes may improve QoL and self-efficacy 3–12 months poststroke. However, a significant group of patients without residual signs or symptoms do not need this aftercare. The scarce resources and time of healthcare professionals...
in stroke could, therefore, be spend more efficiently by only giving the stroke care programme to patients who really need this. In terms of costs, it would be efficient to be able to select which patients might need care and who do not. Little is known about which factors might predict invisible symptoms after 1 year. This study aims to identify potential predictors associated with a lower QoL 1 year after the stroke to be able to select which ‘walking and talking’ patients will need aftercare.

METHODS

Study design
From January 2016 to May 2018 at OLVG Oost hospital, medical records of patients admitted with TIA or minor stroke 1 year ago were screened for participation in this prospective cohort study. TIA and minor stroke were defined as acute neurological deficits that fully resolve within 24 hours and 3 days, respectively, followed by discharge from the hospital without the need for rehabilitation treatment. These patients had a mRS of <2 (see the Health outcomes section). As part of standard clinical care, patients with TIA and stroke discharged to home are re-evaluated by a specialised stroke nurse shortly after discharge. All patients with residual or new symptoms are referred to the Beroerte Adviescentrum (BAC), a Stroke Advice Centre in Amsterdam for further outpatient care where health outcomes are assessed at baseline (i.e., shortly after the TIA or stroke). The BAC is a service in Amsterdam run by nurses to support patients discharged home after stroke to improve independence and self-rehabilitation. Because patients can only participate in this study when baseline assessments were completed, patients who were not referred to BAC or did not complete baseline assessments were excluded. Furthermore, patients were excluded if below 18 years of age, if insufficiently proficient in Dutch or if they had dementia or behavioural disorders compromising study participation. The study received full ethical approval and all included patients gave written consent.

Participants
Eligible patients were initially contacted by telephone. Following verbal consent, paper study materials were sent by mail and included study information, consent form, forms for assessing health status at 1 year poststroke and a form for obtaining sociodemographic information. After written consent and the completed study forms were returned, a telephone-based assessment of the mRS was done. Additional clinical data were collected from medical records. Baseline health status was assessed 1 year prior as part of standard clinical care (figure 1).

Patient and public involvement
The aim and objective of this study have been based on the need for better patient-tailored aftercare for patients with TIA or minor stroke. As experiences of patients who had a TIA or minor stroke and previous research in stroke care revealed unrecognised symptoms and burden of disease, earlier and improved identification of patients ‘at risk’ could be beneficial for the long-term QoL after stroke. However, we did not involve patients or patient advisers in the design, recruitment or conduct of the study. In our study, all health outcomes were completed on paper surveys at home, and structured telephone interviews. Participants were easily accessible by telephone allowing better recruitment and participation rates. The results of this study will be disseminated to all study participants by letter at the end of the study, as stated in the informed consent form.

Health outcomes
Health outcomes were assessed at baseline as part of standard clinical practice and 1 year poststroke (follow-up) as part of this study. QoL was assessed with the research and development-36 scale (RAND-36), one of the most widely used health-related quality of life (HRQoL) survey instruments in stroke. It comprises 36 items, assessing the following health domains: physical functioning, social functioning, role limitations due to physical problems, role limitations due to mental problems, mental health, vitality, bodily pain, fatigue, general health and health change. These domains can be scored into scale scores, from which two summary scores can be derived: a physical (PCS) and a mental (MCS) component score. The scores range from 0 to 100, with higher scores reflecting better outcome. The RAND-36 has been translated and validated into multiple languages, including Dutch. The minimal clinically important difference (MCID) for the RAND-36 is in the range of 3–5 points. In this study, the Dutch RAND-36 V.2 was used.

Depression and anxiety were assessed with the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (HADS), an extensively researched and validated scale for the measurement of anxiety and depression. The HADS consists of 14 questions graded on a 4-point rating scale. Subsequently two subscales, anxiety (seven items) and depression (seven items), can be calculated by summing their respective items. A score between 7 and 10 suggests probable anxiety or depressive disorder, whereas a score of 11 or higher is indicative of an anxiety or depressive disorder. The MCID for the HADS in patients with cardiovascular disease is 1.7 points. In addition, the Stroke-Specific Anxiety and Depression Questionnaire (SSADQ), developed by neuropsychologists for the assessment of symptoms of anxiety and depression specific to stroke, was assessed. This questionnaire, although not validated, was thought to be more sensitive than the HADS in this stroke population.
The degree of disability or functional dependence after stroke was assessed with the mRS, an outcome measurement scale ranging from 0 (no limitations or symptoms in activities of daily living) to 5 (bedridden) and 6 (death). The mRS is also shown to be reliably assessed through telephone interviews. Baseline mRS was assessed in person by one of three stroke nurses of the BAC at 3 months postevent. Follow-up mRS was assessed through a semi-structured telephone interview by one of four researchers, who all completed an online video-based training developed by Quinn et al. Sociodemographic characteristics collected at follow-up were: marital status (married, unmarried or widowed); level of education, assessed on a Dutch 7-point scale (Schaal van Verhage) and afterwards stratified into three groups: low (1-2), average (3-5), high (6-7); current living arrangement (alone or with spouse/relative(s)); recurrence of TIA, ischaemic or haemorrhagic stroke during the period between onset of stroke and follow-up.

Statistical analysis
Mean, median and the visual inspection of histograms and P-P plots were used to assess whether or not the data were normally distributed. Independent samples t-test and χ² test were used for assessing differences in patient characteristics. Changes between baseline and follow-up health outcomes were assessed using paired samples t-tests and Wilcoxon signed-rank tests for data distributed normally and non-normally, respectively. Multiple linear regression analysis was performed for the identification of predictors of QoL, using a stepwise backward elimination method with a p-value of >0.10 set as the threshold for elimination. For the remaining analyses, a p-value of <0.05 was considered to be statistically significant. The following 12 predictors were entered at the beginning of the analysis: marital status, HADS depression score, HADS anxiety score, SSADQ score, recurrence of TIA or minor stroke, living arrangement, level of education, age, sex, mRS score, incidence, location of TIA or minor stroke, and follow-up.

Predictors of QoL
Mental component
For the mental component of the RAND-36, we found two predictors that explained 39.8% of the variance, with \( R^2=0.398 \), \( R^2\text{ adjusted}=0.387 \) and \( F=37.638 \) (2, 114) (p<0.001). The results are summarised in table 4.

Physical component
For the physical component of the RAND-36, we found three predictors explaining 26.1% of the variance, with \( R^2=0.261 \), \( R^2\text{ adjusted}=0.241 \) and \( F=13.392 \) (3, 114) (p<0.001). The results are summarised in table 4.

DISCUSSION
In this study, we found that depression and anxiety at baseline predicted a worse mental component of QoL after 1 year as measured with the RAND-36 in patients discharged home after a TIA or minor stroke. Depression at baseline, but also age and being a woman, predicted a worse physical component of QoL after 1 year. These findings might be important for selecting patients for interventions to prevent unforeseen problems long after their TIA or minor stroke.

In these patients, we also found a slight improvement of QoL after 1 year as measured with the RAND-36, without being clinically significant. Van Mierlo et al also reported modest improvements in QoL in a population with more severe stroke patients, but mostly in the first 6 months after onset and more pronounced in activities of daily life (ADL)-independent patients. Our study confirms that in ADL-independent patients after stroke, the QoL also improves within 1 year, but less obvious than in the previous study. We think that this is a reflection of coping
Table 1  Comparison of patient characteristics of the study population and the excluded patients

| Characteristic          | N=120          | Excluded patients (N=250) | P value |
|-------------------------|----------------|---------------------------|---------|
| Age, y, mean (SD)       | 68.6 (11.5)    | 68.4 (12.1)               | 0.891*  |
| Sex                     |                |                           | 0.155†  |
| Female                  | 43 (35.8)      | 109 (43.6)                |         |
| Male                    | 77 (64.2)      | 141 (56.4)                |         |
| Diagnosis               |                |                           | 0.360†  |
| TIA                     | 29 (24.2)      | 50 (20.0)                 |         |
| Minor stroke            | 91 (75.8)      | 200 (80.0)                |         |
| Localisation            |                |                           | 0.508‡  |
| Right hemisphere        | 31 (25.8)      | 75 (30.0)                 |         |
| Left hemisphere         | 55 (45.8)      | 101 (40.4)                |         |
| Vertebrobasilar         | 30 (25.0)      | 56 (22.4)                 |         |
| Ocular                  | 0 (0.0)        | 3 (1.2)                   |         |
| Other                   | 4 (3.3)        | 15 (6.0)                  |         |
| Stroke incidence        |                |                           | 0.267†  |
| Relapse                 | 20 (16.7)      | 54 (21.6)                 |         |
| First ever              | 100 (83.3)     | 196 (78.4)                |         |
| Marital status          |                |                           |         |
| Married                 | 61 (50.8)      |                           |         |
| Unmarried               | 44 (36.7)      |                           |         |
| Widowed                 | 15 (12.5)      |                           |         |
| Education               |                |                           |         |
| Low                     | 12 (10.0)      |                           |         |
| Average                 | 58 (48.3)      |                           |         |
| High                    | 49 (40.8)      |                           |         |
| Living arrangement      |                |                           |         |
| Alone                   | 51 (42.5)      |                           |         |
| With spouse/relative(s) | 68 (56.7)      |                           |         |

All data are expressed as n (%), except where specified.
* t-test
† χ² test
‡ Fisher exact test
TIA, transient ischaemic attack.

mechanisms in the chronic phase when patients still have handicaps of problems after their stroke or TIA.

In this study, we found four predictors for a lower QoL after 1 year, but depression was the only one that was significant in both domains of QoL. The more symptoms of depression, as measured with the HADS at baseline, the worse the mental and physical component of QoL was after 1 year. Depression at baseline is frequently seen in patients who suffered from a stroke. A review estimated that one third of stroke survivors suffered from depression at any time up to 5 years after stroke. The finding that depression at baseline is a predictor for worse QoL after a TIA or minor stroke was well in line with a previous study, that showed that poststroke depression in the acute phase after stroke predicts worse QoL 1 year after TIA or minor stroke. Another study found that poststroke depression

Table 2  SSADQ and MRS scores at baseline and follow-up (paired samples t-test)

|                      | Baseline       | Follow-up       | 95% CI     | t-value (df) | P value |
|----------------------|----------------|----------------|------------|--------------|---------|
| SSADQ score          | 17.1 (8.3)     | 13.5 (8.3)     | 2.119 to 5.037 | 4.87 (89) | <0.001  |
| mRS score            | 1.0 (0.8)      | 1.2 (0.9)      | -0.372 to 0.009 | -1.90 (76) | 0.061   |

SSADQ, Stroke-Specific Anxiety Depression Questionnaire; mRS, modified Rankin Scale.
Table 3  HADS and RAND-36 scores at baseline and follow-up (Wilcoxon signed-rank test)

|                      | Baseline         | Follow-up        |
|----------------------|------------------|------------------|
|                      | Mean (SD) N      | Mean (SD) N      | Z-score | P value |
| HADS depression      | 4.3 (4.1) 119    | 4.2 (4.1) 119    | −0.759  | 0.448   |
| HADS anxiety         | 4.6 (3.6) 118    | 4.3 (3.8) 119    | −1.089  | 0.276   |
| RAND-36 physical component | 44.8 (10.2) 116 | 45.0 (11.4) 119 | −1.225  | 0.221   |
| RAND-36 mental component | 46.1 (11.1) 116 | 47.7 (11.1) 119 | −1.451  | 0.147   |

HADS, Hospital Anxiety Depression Scale; RAND-36, Reseach and Development-36 scale.

Table 4  Predictors of QoL after 1 year (multiple linear regression analysis)

|                      | B     | SE    | β     | t-value | P value |
|----------------------|-------|-------|-------|---------|---------|
| Mental component     |       |       |       |         |         |
| Constant             | 56.14 | 1.32  | 42.52 | <0.001  |         |
| HADS depression      | −1.35 | 0.25  | −0.5  | −5.47   | <0.001  |
| HADS anxiety         | −0.57 | 0.28  | −0.19 | −2.07   | 0.041   |
| Physical component   |       |       |       |         |         |
| Constant             | 65.13 | 6.1   | 10.67 | <0.001  |         |
| Age                  | −0.26 | 0.08  | −0.27 | −3.25   | 0.002   |
| Sex                  | 4.1   | 1.92  | 0.18  | 2.14    | 0.034   |
| HADS depression      | −1.1  | 0.23  | −0.4  | −4.9    | <0.001  |

HADS, Hospital Anxiety Depression Scale; QoL, quality of life.

has a high association with disability and poor QoL 1 year after minor stroke. We think that early depressive symptoms might be a criterion in our patients to select the ones who need aftercare soon after their TIA or minor stroke.

The anxiety scale of the HADS was found to be a predictor for a worse mental component and not for a worse physical component of the RAND-36. Previous research also found that poststroke anxiety is less important than poststroke depression as a predictor for QoL. Nevertheless, an association was found in several studies between poststroke anxiety and QoL and anxiety early after TIA or minor stroke might also be a reason to offer more active stroke aftercare.

In our study, women have a lower physical QoL after stroke, in comparison with men. This result is in line with previous studies that found that women have worse HRQoL after stroke, in comparison with men. A higher prevalence of disability and a greater age at stroke onset in women could be a possible explanation for this finding. It is important to realise that in previous research in the general population, women had worse HRQoL compared with men even without having a disease. However, socioeconomic status and sociodemographic characteristics such as race and education might be an explanation for the differences in that study. Age itself was found to be a predictor for physical QoL. This is also in line with another study that stated that as the population ages, the number of strokes and therefore stroke survivors with poor QoL increases.

The strength of our study is the prospective nature of our cohort in which possible predictors have been included that have been carefully selected based on previous research. A limitation of this study is the fact that a substantial part of our study population of patients who suffered a TIA or minor stroke was excluded due to several reasons. However, there were no differences in patient characteristics between the study population and the excluded patients. Another limitation is that during the year between baseline and follow-up, there was no insight into outpatient rehabilitation care, changes in medication or employment.

Conclusions

In this study, we found that baseline depression and anxiety predicted worse mental QoL, whereas baseline depression, age and sex predicted worse physical QoL. With the identification of these predictors, we might be able to select more efficiently and timely the patients with TIA or minor stroke who need stroke aftercare.

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