

A long way to go for stroke in Asia

by Yi Ma

“It’s time for us to start the journey and we have no time to wait”, said Yangfeng Wu, Professor of Epidemiology at the Peking University School of Public Health. “Firstly, risk factor profiles of stroke and the change in the profiles caused by socioeconomic development and lifestyle changes still remain largely unclear; secondly, the trends in major risk factors in developing countries like China and India are undoubtedly increasing” he said. Declining trends in incidence and mortality of stroke seen in many developed countries are not expected in China and other Asian countries (excluding Japan) in the near future.

According to the WHO World Health Statistics 2008, stroke is the second most common cause of death worldwide. The situation has improved in developed countries - Professor Wu quoted statistics from the UK that show the stroke mortality rate has decreased by more than 60% from 1979 to 2003 in 30-69-year-olds.

While stroke is still the single leading cause of death in China and many other Asian countries, a China MUCA study showed that from 1991 to 1999, there was almost no significant change in the trends of incidence of stroke in China.

“The changes in incidence and mortality of stroke between countries and between subtypes of stroke show a very diverse pattern in Asian countries,” he said. For example, data from Japan indicate an early decline in stroke mortality in Asia, whereas data for some other Asian countries suggest stable or increasing stroke mortality. Ischemic stroke is declining for the most part, yet intracranial cerebral stroke seems to be unchanged or even increased.

In China, different trends exist within different cities. “This may be due to the differences in risk factor profiles and the change of the profiles caused by socioeconomic development and lifestyle changes,” said Professor Wu.

Factors, like the CT scan rate increase from 50% in 1991 to 90% in 2000 may explain the trends in the proportion of different subtypes of stroke in China, for example, the decrease of undetermined stroke. But convincing explanations for the changes still remain largely unclear.

Professor Wu did not express optimism in the future, with the undoubted increasing trends in major risk factors in China, such as hypertension, hypercholesterolemia, diabetes, overweight and obesity, and the consistently high smoking rate in men. ■