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EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS (HCPS) WORKING IN ACUTE STROKE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

N. Donohue¹, R. Galvin², F. Horgan¹

¹Royal College of Surgeons, Dublin, Ireland

²University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland

Background: The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the delivery of stroke care internationally. The INAS (Irish National Audit for Stroke) report 2020, found that there was no significant disruption to stroke services as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Little is known about the experiences of Health-Care Professionals (HCPs) who were working in stroke care during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study explored the experiences of HCPs working in acute stroke care in an Irish hospital group during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods: A qualitative descriptive study was conducted. Using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling, 16 semi-structured interviews of healthcare professionals from six specialities (Medicine, Nursing, Physiotherapy, Occupational therapy, Speech and Language Therapy and Medical Social Work) in two model three hospitals and one model four hospital were conducted. Interviews were virtual. Analysis was completed using the Braun and Clarke six-step method. This research was approved by the Royal College of Surgeons Research Ethics committee and permission was secured from the Stroke Clinical lead at each site to conduct interviews.

Results: Two main themes emerged: (i) Disruption of the end-to-end acute stroke pathway and (ii) Opportunities of the pandemic to develop a new model of care. Theme (i) suggests challenges were experienced in emergency care, access to Stroke Units (SU) beds and multidisciplinary teams (MDT). In theme (ii) participants described opportunities in telemedicine, the development of new rehabilitation and existing Early Supported Discharge (ESD) pathways.

Conclusion: This study highlights the lived experience of HCPs, the disruption to the stroke pathway and the opportunities as a result of the pandemic. It demonstrates the need for further exploration of, telemedicine, alternative rehabilitation pathways in stroke care and the need for a wider stroke education programme for HCPs working outside stroke. Finally, this study highlights the unwavering resilience and empathy of HCPs working in Stroke.