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Research on strokes bolstered

Researchers at Gainesville's Veterans Affairs Medical Center have received a \$1.3 million grant to develop a program that will help train stroke victims to walk normally again.

With the four-year grant, Dr. Steve Kautz and Dr. Andrea Behrman of the Brain Rehabilitation Research Center want to determine exactly what trained therapists are able to change about the way that a stroke victim walks, and relate that to how much better they do at the end of the locomotor training.

A stroke, sometimes called a "brain attack," occurs when blood flow to the brain is interrupted. When a stroke occurs, brain cells in the immediate area begin to die because they stop getting the oxygen and nutrients they need to function.

Depending on what function the damaged part of the brain had, people may lose their ability to control movements on one side of their bodies. Speech, vision, coordination, balance, memory and perception can also be affected.

Stroke is the third leading cause of death in the United States and a leading cause of serious, long-term disability in adults. About 600,000 new strokes are reported in the U.S. each year.

"After people have a stroke, quite a few have a walking deficit," Kautz said. "This study can help with that, so we are excited to offer it."

Most previous studies of walking have evaluated changes in outcomes such as walking speed, without looking at changes in coordination or the mechanics of walking, Kautz and Behrman say.

Using the biomechanical equipment in the Gainesville VA's Human Motor Performance Laboratory, they will collect detailed measurements, and put those together with a state-of-the-art intervention, Kautz said.

"We want to determine exactly what we are able to change about the way that they walk, and relate that to how much better they do at the end," he said.

The researchers are looking for 36 candidates for the study, and participants do not have to be in the VA's health care system.

The Brain Rehabilitation Research Center will be screening applicants, Kautz said.

For more information on stroke rehabilitation research, contact the Malcom Randall VA Medical Center at (352) 376-1611 and ask for the Brain Rehabilitation Research Center.
