

## HEALTH & FAMILY

# Helping comebacks from brain attacks

### St. Francis Hospital's stroke rehabilitation unit adds hope to patients' therapies

By Mike Lang  
Staff reporter

Vince Mullay was in his Rehoboth Beach home on July 23 when he was felled by a severe stroke. He was 59, in good health and did not consider himself a candidate for a stroke.

"I ate well, I exercised. Next thing I know I'm on the floor," Mullay said at the Acute Rehabilitation Unit at St. Francis Hospital in Wilmington, where he stayed from Aug. 1 until his discharge in late October.

Mullay, who celebrated his 60th birthday as a patient at the hospital, said he is fortunate to have had St. Francis as an option for recovery and therapy following his stroke. He said the personalized care and dedication on the part of the therapists and other employees have made a big difference.

"It's the simple things that are done here, and it's been helping me better than going to any high-tech place," said Mullay, a member of St. Edmond's Parish. "We use playing cards, and they make me reach as far as I can go for it and place it down on the table. That's to get movement on my left side, which is dead. All of the stuff that is done here is done with the patient in mind."

St. Francis received certification in stroke care in August from the Joint Commission on Primary Stroke Centers. It's one of two

hospitals in Delaware to be so certified, along with Christiana Care.

Diane Gutierrez, who directs the Acute Rehabilitation Unit at St. Francis, said the certification did not fundamentally change the way the hospital treats stroke

patients, but it made St. Francis more "well-attuned to the entire continuum of services for an individual who has a stroke or neurological impairment, to respond in a very expeditious fashion and get them through the different service lines that we have here in the hospital as quickly as possible so that they get the best quality of care available to them."

The certification is important because people research where to go in case of various illnesses and favor those that are certified, said Inga Sinyangwe, a St. Francis nurse who has extensive experience in critical care.

There are two types of strokes, Sinyangwe said. An ischemic stroke occurs when a blood clot prevents blood from reaching the brain. That can be treated with

clot-busting medication. The other is a hemorrhagic stroke, which is the rupturing of a blood vessel in the brain, resulting in bleeding. That type tends to be more severe and can't be treated with medication, she said.

"In the simplest of terms, a stroke is a brain attack, much like a heart attack," Gutierrez said.

Sinyangwe said if people suspect they or someone they are with is suffering a stroke, they call 911 immediately instead of waiting to see if symptoms go away. A patient treated within the first three or four hours is more likely to recover. Symptoms can include blurred vision, slurred speech, headaches and weakness in the extremities.

"The one thing I think is really important for people should know is that 90 percent of strokes are preventable," she said, "if people would watch their diet, if they would at least walk 20-30 minutes five times a week, if they have high blood pressure tendency in their family, if they would get it treated, if they would watch their stress levels."

Cholesterol levels, family history, alcohol intake and smoking also can be contributing factors, said Dr. Anne Mack, the medical director of the rehab unit.

At St. Francis, there is a stroke protocol in place, Sinyangwe said. "The entire hospital is basically revolving around that patient."

An incoming patient will receive a CAT scan and other tests to determine which type of stroke they suffered and to rule out other possibilities, including dementia, fever and a urinary tract infection, Gutierrez said. From there, a treatment plan will be determined.

Stroke is the third-leading cause of death and disability in the United States, Gutierrez said. Once thought of as restricted to the elderly, people of all ages are vulnerable. St. Francis treats three to eight confirmed cases a month, and the number of stroke patients on her rehabilitation unit has doubled in the past year. The average age is 72, although St. Francis has treated a patient as young as 7 years old.



Diane Gutierrez



The Dialog/Don Blake

Physical therapist Sara Shrouds, from Holy Family Parish in Newark, helps Vince Mullay of St. Edmond's Parish in Rehoboth Beach with his leg brace during his stroke therapy time at St. Francis Hospital.

### Causes and treatment

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### Hope in rehab

"Your brain is like the command center of your entire being. And so when the brain is attacked and cells are damaged there, even though you know you may need to move the left arm or left leg, that may not occur because there's a disconnect between the brain and the body," Gutierrez said. Regaining those lost abilities or learning how to compensate takes a long time, she added.

Patients in the acute rehabilitation unit at St. Francis receive three hours of physical therapy daily, Sinyangwe said. A patient's determination and attitude can help with recovery, she said. Mullay agrees.

"You have to look at it as a job, not being here in a hospital," he said. "There's times when I spend

extra time because I want to get as much of (his therapist's) input on getting better as I can."

Mullay's wife, Laurie, said St. Francis offers some intangibles that stand out as well. She is originally from Wilmington, so she was able to stay with family much of the time when she wasn't back in Sussex County to tend to their business, Fun to Fine Jewelry. Some nights, however, the hospital allowed her to stay the night.

"It's been like a home to me and Vince. You feel like you're part of a family here," she said.

Before he began his treatment at St. Francis, Mullay thought his life "was over." The medical treatment and the atmosphere at St. Francis have changed his outlook.

"I feel like I have hope, that there is a future for me and I will have a life."

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