

### **Abstract**

Mental and social strains on relatives of stroke patients have been investigated repeatedly but there is little information about their general health and quality of life. The purpose of this study was to describe these variables at three points in time after stroke. Relatives were questioned with the SF-36 and the WHOQoL-Bref at patients' admission to in-patient rehabilitation and six months as well as one year after discharge.

Significant differences between relatives and normative data existed both during in-patient rehabilitation and one year after rehabilitation. There were also significant changes over this time period. Relatives felt especially impaired during the patients' in-patient rehabilitation. Half a year after the patients' discharge, relatives were in a clearly better state. However, in the following six months they experienced again a decline in health and quality of life, which at that point in time also resulted in physical impairment.

Females perceived stronger physical impairments than men during the patients' in-patient rehabilitation and stronger mental strain a year after rehabilitation. Patients' partners felt in every way better than patients' parents or children. Relatives living in the same household felt less impaired than those living separated from the patient. Relatives in charge of care exhibited impairments if the patient had to stay home and needed care between first hospitalization and the later stay in a rehabilitation-center. In comparison to non-caregivers, caregivers' stress was reflected in psychosocial domains six months after patients discharge and in worse physical functionality and quality of life one year after rehabilitation. Relatives who perceived the patient as dependent in activities of everyday life or as depressed were more impaired than relatives who did not.

At the early stage, impairments could be explained by worries of relatives about the patient and by uncertainty about the future, and at the late stage as consequences of continuous strain and the process of adjusting.

Results reveal that relatives of stroke-patients go through different stages while coping with the chronic illness of their family members. They represent a risk group in terms of developing mental as well as physical illnesses and should be supported effectively.