ISSUES & IDEAS

There is life after a stroke

While hospitals do a great job of saving people, more investment is needed for recovery

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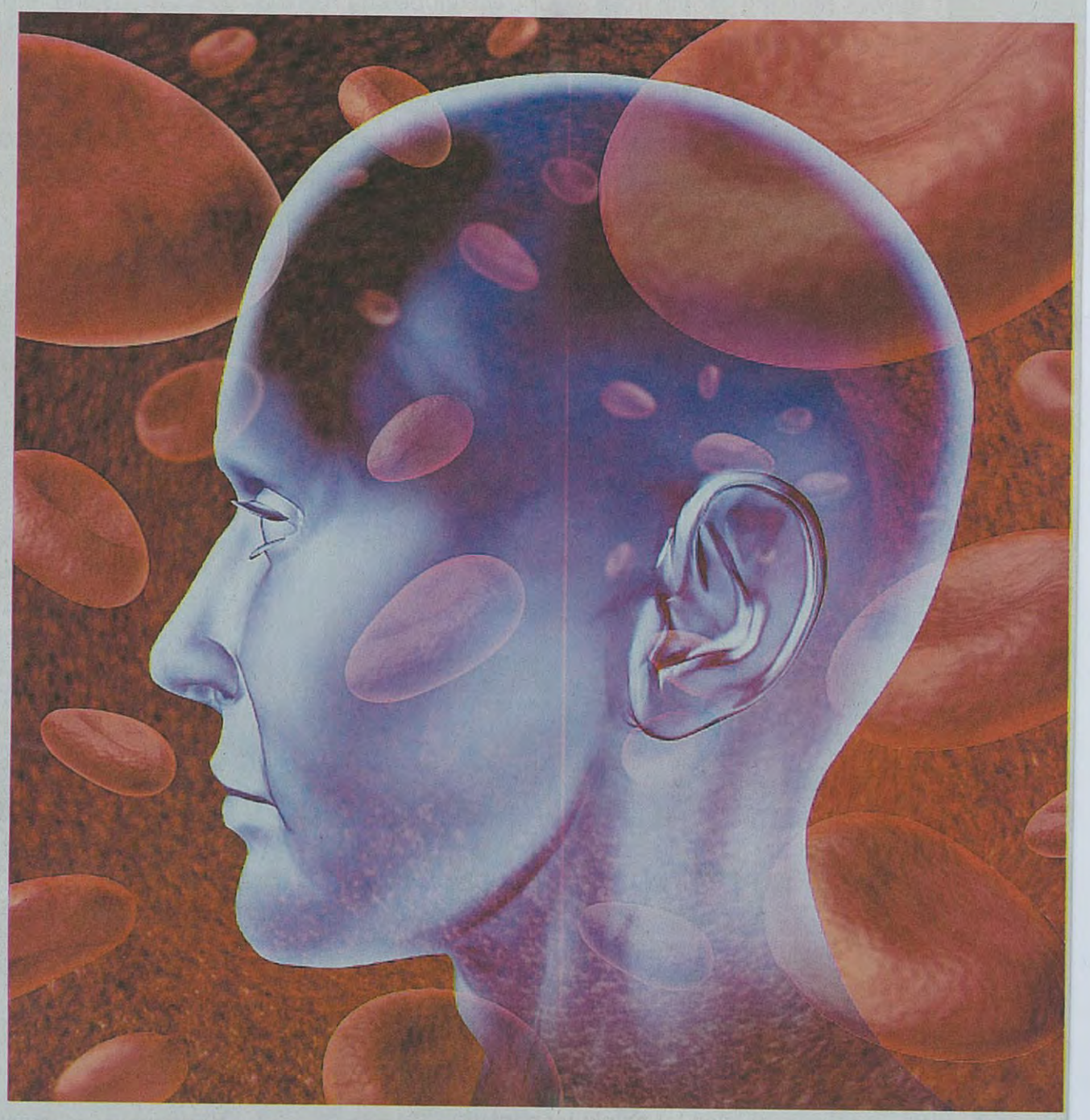

Without support for survivors of stroke, they often become isolated, lonely, depressed and suicidal.

A stroke is sudden, terrifying and destructive.

It occurs when blood flow to the brain is blocked or interrupted. When blood is unable to reach an area or areas of the brain, brain cells begin to die, which can cause permanent damage. The extent of that damage varies from person to person, and can result in problems with speech, memory or movement — but in all cases the person's life is irrevocably changed. Nothing is ever the same.

Of every 100 people who have a stroke, 15 die, 10 recover completely, 25 recover with a minor impairment or disability, 40 are left with a moderate to severe impairment, and 10 are so severely disabled they require long-term care. Clearly, these statistics tell a story that involves significant rehabilitation and recovery time for many who have had a stroke.

Health care systems and health care organizations around the world, across the country and throughout B.C. focus on prevention, treatment, medication and hospitalization, while "life after stroke" issues tend to receive less attention. Hospitals do a great job of saving people who survive a stroke but sooner or later most of those survivors go back home. What then? Without support to aid recovery, stroke survivors can become isolated, lonely, depressed and suicidal. They can lose their work, their friends, and the meaning of their lives. But it doesn't have to be that way. There is life after stroke, and life after a stroke is about recovery.

Knowledge about stroke recovery has expanded and evolved over the years. We know so much more than we did even a decade ago. It was accepted that once the six-month mark was reached, the likelihood of further improvements diminished. We now know this to be untrue. Stroke recovery is a process in which there are continuous opportunities for improvement.

In order to promote stroke recovery, we need to assist and support the individual so that that person is eventually reintegrated into their community. The problem with current models of community care is that the recovery of the person is often left entirely to the family and other caregivers such as neighbours and friends. We need more services and programs in our communities including health education, mobility exercises, communication and memory exercises, peer support, caregiver support, health care system navigation, and last but not least, healthy doses of social interaction and recreation. These are the tools that help stroke survivors reintegrate, re-establish and normalize their lives so that true independence is achievable.

There are 6,500 strokes in this province every year and the Stroke Recovery Association of B.C. is striving to develop a model that allows us to reach as many people who have had them as possible. We must increase our capacity and expand our service delivery because, unfortunately, more and more individuals are seeking our services, and that number will only rise in the coming years as our population ages.

After age 55, the risk of stroke doubles every 10 years. However, the newest at-risk group is younger Canadians in their 20s and 30s. With a predicted increase in the numbers of cases of cardiovascular diseases over the next 20 years across all age groups, the resulting burden is expected to only increase.

The Stroke Recovery Association of B.C.'s coming Stroke Recovery Education Days across the province are designed to help spread the word that recovery must be human and personal, and take into consideration all facets of that person's life, before and after. We can provide knowledge, tools and skills that stroke survivors and caregivers can use in improving independence in daily living.

I started this article by saying that after stroke, life is irrevocably changed. We know that life will never be the same again after a stroke, but it doesn't have to be worse. Some say their lives are better in some ways — they look after themselves more; they have a deeper appreciation for the simple pleasures of life, like a grandchild's smile or a beautiful sunset; they are more understanding of the problems faced by others and they value the things they still enjoy even more.

Many stroke survivors continue to enjoy fulfilling and meaningful lives after stroke. They learn to make the most of the abilities they have. Every stroke survivor in B.C. deserves respect, inclusion and support in their home community. We already spent a lot of time, effort and money in saving them. Now we have to bring them back to life. That's why we need to invest in stroke recovery. There is life after stroke.

Tim Readman is the executive director of the Stroke Recovery Association of B.C.

Stroke Recovery Education Days take place in Vancouver, Nanaimo and White Rock on June 8, Kelowna on June 15 and in the northern region via a webinar on June 15. For more information on the events, visit: strokerecoverybc.ca/events