

You're not alone: Stroke survivors meet to share

BY ANNA WILSON
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MORGANTON - Their ages range from 23 to 80. Some use canes, others use a walker. Some do not appear to use any assistive equipment. They come alone or with caregivers. But they all have one thing in common.

At some point, they each suffered a stroke. Some had a stroke as recently as nine months and others as long as five years ago.

When a blood vessel in the brain becomes blocked or bursts, a stroke occurs. Brain tissue deprived of oxygen supplied by the blood begins to die in three to four minutes. The effects on the body are immediate depending on where in the brain the stroke occurred.

For an hour and a half on the second Tuesday of each month, they know they are among friends, among others who understand their frustrations. And they share. Share celebrations, share accomplishments and share tips on dealing with frustrations and difficulties during recovery.

The "Understanding Stroke" Support Group at Blue Ridge HealthCare is the idea of occupational therapist Tabitha Yates, OTR/L. As her stroke patients came in individually for rehabilitation, Yates listened and found out some common threads. She thought forming a support group would help offer a place for people to come together. That way the patients and their caregivers could get together once a month to talk, share their problems and listen to a guest speaker.

Tuesday marked the fifth meeting of the group with seven stroke survivors and five caregivers attending. Among them was Pat Hanson, 77, of Morganton, who had her stroke five years ago.

"I'm still learning," said Hanson, who has attended every meeting. "I get a lot of good information here. I thoroughly enjoy coming."

Hanson says she's just now getting back to doing the things she did before her stroke except for her eating habits. "When I had my stroke, my sugar was out of control and my blood pressure was out the roof," she said. "I'm eating better now."

To better understand how a stroke affects the body, Yates and co-worker Monica Hollar, COTA, gave the group a "tour" of the brain on Tuesday.

TYPES OF STROKE

Strokes can appear as hem-

The human brain weighs an average of 3 pounds in men and 2 pounds 12 ounces in women and has about 100 billion cells called neurons. The brain's structure is almost complete at birth, although it continues to grow until about age 20.

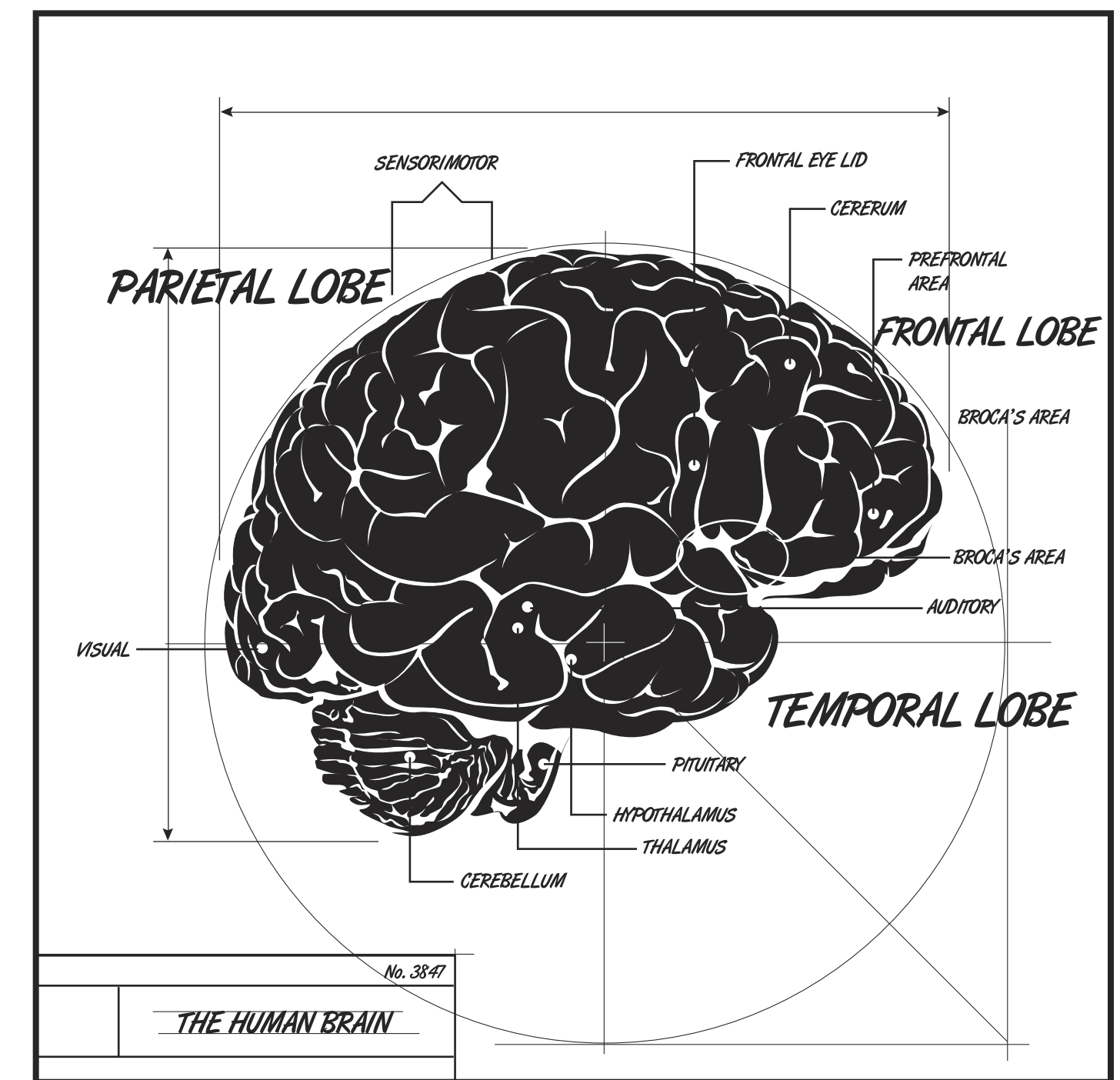
orrhagic strokes, ischemic strokes or transient ischemic attacks, according to information provided by The Cleveland Clinic.

- **Hemorrhagic stroke:** This type of stroke takes place when a weakened blood vessel in the brain ruptures. A hemorrhage, or bleeding from the blood vessel, occurs suddenly. The force of blood that escapes from the blood vessel can also damage surrounding brain tissue. Hemorrhagic stroke is the most serious kind of stroke.

- **Ischemic stroke:** This type of stroke occurs when a blood vessel in the brain develops a clot and cuts off the blood supply to the brain. A blood clot that forms in a blood vessel in the brain is called a "thrombus." A blood clot that forms in another part of the body, such as the neck or lining of the heart, and travels to the brain is called an "embolus." Blood clots often result from a condition called "atherosclerosis," the build-up of plaque with fatty deposits within blood vessel walls.

- **Transient ischemic attack (TIA):** A TIA should be treated as seriously as a stroke. A TIA occurs when blood flow to a certain part of the brain is cut off for a short period of time, usually 15 minutes or less. Although TIA is a painless episode, it is an important warning sign that a stroke may follow.

"Knowing where your stroke took place is important to pinning down some of the problems you might be having," Yates said. "The left side of the brain controls the right



side of the body and the right side of the brain controls the left side of the body."

Among the many types of disabilities that can result from a stroke are:

- Inability to move part of the body (paralysis)
- Weakness in part of the body
- Numbness in part of the body
- Inability to speak or understand words; difficulty communicating
- Difficulty swallowing
- Vision loss
- Memory loss, confusion or poor judgment
- Change in personality; emotional problems

Group members shared their own physical weaknesses and swapped ways to combat certain problems. One woman said her stroke only affected her speech. She still has difficulty putting words together in order to make

herself understood. Another member suggested she write things down. Yet another suggested typing.

A member also shared how his condition improved when he began taking fish oil and omega 3 supplements. "I'm not sure if it will work for anyone else, but I could tell a big difference," he said.

Other suggestions coming out of Tuesday's group: sign-

ing up for the free magazines dealing with stroke; finding information online; becoming part of the online stroke community.

"It's another way of recognizing that I am not alone," one member said.

Everyone attending this meeting said they would encourage other survivors to attend. "Learning never stops," one said. "Rehab and learning

goes on for a lifetime."

This is exactly the sort of thing Yates envisioned when she began the support group - a place for people to come together and share.

TO BE ADDED to the mailing list about upcoming meetings, please call Tabitha Yates at 580-6808.

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Pat Hanson, left, talks with Monica Hollar, COTA, after the Understanding Stroke Support Group meeting on Tuesday at Grace Hospital. Hanson had her stroke five years ago, and is just now getting back to doing everything she used to do before the stroke. She has drastically changed her eating habits, though.

Signs & Symptoms of Stroke

Call 9-1-1 immediately if any of the following major stroke warning signs occur:

SUDDEN WEAKNESS or numbness that occurs in the face, arm or leg, particularly on one side of the body.

SUDDEN DIFFICULTY seeing in one or both eyes.

SUDDEN CONFUSION, difficulty speaking or difficulty understanding. May have slurred speech or confused speech.

SUDDEN PROBLEMS with walking, dizziness; a loss of balance or coordination

SUDDEN, SEVERE headache, the cause of which is unknown