

AF Association welcomes NICE guidance to help improve lives

AF Association, Wednesday 24 September 2014: National heart charity, AF Association backs new guidance released today by the National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE), which recommends self-monitoring, either at home or when convenient, among patients taking warfarin.

The majority of patients diagnosed with AF, the most common heart rhythm disorder, take warfarin to help manage their personal AF-related stroke risk. Warfarin, one of the most commonly prescribed blood thinning (anticoagulation) medications, requires regular monitoring to ensure optimal management of an individual's AF-related stroke risk. Today's guidance recommends the use of new devices among AF patients across England to support self-testing.

Atrial fibrillation (AF) is the most common heart rhythm disorder. It is characterised by an irregular heartbeat, and reduces the ability of the heart to pump blood effectively around the body. Symptoms of the condition include feeling faint, palpitations and shortness of breath, although up to half of those living with condition are thought to be asymptomatic. At the age of 40 we each have a one in four lifetime risk of developing the condition, which carries a 500% increased risk of stroke. AF is the fourth largest single risk factor for stroke, with AF-related strokes among the most deadly and disabling.

Jo Jerrome, AF Association Deputy CEO, said: "It is very clear that for some people who have been prescribed warfarin or a vitamin K antagonist as a long term therapy, monitoring their INR levels using a home self-testing device can be really beneficial.

"Self-monitoring can also support the person's ability to still manage work, family and everyday commitments and pleasures without frequent, and at times, costly, medical appointments.

"For many, this is a life-restoring option, reducing fear and restoring hope to enjoy a full, healthy and long life. For the healthcare services, self monitoring can also free up precious NHS time without reducing safety or care."

AF Association patient member, Rosemary Najim, said: "Many AF patients put on warfarin will most likely have to take warfarin for the rest of their lives. Anyone who takes it should be offered the chance to self-monitor.

"With self-monitoring you can test every few days when the need arises, rather than wait longer. This is so important, I started self-monitoring my INR last August and then suddenly in January my INR level fell dramatically.

"Fortunately I could keep on top this through my regular checks, if I was waiting to visit my Anticoagulation Clinic I could have been out of range for up to 12 weeks, increasing my risk of suffering from an AF-related stroke."

For patients who don't have access to self-monitoring through their GP, balancing warfarin and lifestyle can be difficult.

One such patient, Elizabeth Bell, from Cumbria, would welcome the opportunity to self-test. She said:

"I would like to self-test but the option is not there in my locality. I often struggle to stay in therapeutic range and it can be perilous in bad winter weather to get to my INR clinic to have my bloods checked.

"I have been there 33 times in the past year. Having the option to self-test would make a great difference to my life."

Dr Matthew Fay, GPwSI AF at Westcliffe Medical Practice, in Shipley, West Yorkshire, is pleased to offer self monitoring to his patients. He said:

"Anyone taking warfarin should be given the opportunity to self-monitor. The burden of regular visits to an INR clinic can be huge, especially among those elderly populations with AF in the community.

"With effective communication and a clear understanding of what is involved, self monitoring presents a great tool to empower patients who otherwise might feel on the periphery of their own care. I encourage all patients on long-term warfarin therapy to discuss options around self monitoring with their doctor."

AF Association is encouraging self-monitoring patients to share a 'selfie' in support of this news by visiting www.facebook.com/selfiechek

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Notes:

1) AF Association is an international charity that provides support, information and guidance to anyone affected by atrial fibrillation. It works in partnership with patients and clinical experts to advance the education of both the medical profession and the general public on the risks, detection and treatment of AF.

2) Patients taking warfarin are required to regularly check their blood to make sure they are in therapeutic range and that their international normalisation ratio (INR) is stable. An INR of between 2.0 and 3.0 is considered optimal in reducing an individual's AF-related stroke risk. Diet interactions can cause INR levels to fluctuate; it is important that patients taking warfarin monitor both their diet and bloods frequently.

3) Your INR readings can be measured yourself at home using a finger prick blood sample and a Point of Care (POC) device. You can then provide your INR readings to your doctor or nurse at an agreed time, generally by telephone. Your doctor or nurse will advise you on the dose of warfarin you need to take or self-manage.

Following appropriate training, the dose of warfarin and frequency of testing is also managed by you with support from your doctor or nurse.

4) An AF Association patient information sheet on self monitoring is available to download

here <http://www.atrialfibrillation.org.uk/files/file/110317-jf-FINAL-Anticoagulation%20Self%20Monitoring%20fact%20sheet.pdf>

5) For more information or to arrange an interview, please contact Andrew Robson on 01789 867527 or email andrew@heartrhythmalliance.org

6) The AF Association website can be found at www.afa.org.uk

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