Chronic pain after stroke: a systematic review

Cláudia Gemelgo¹, Ana Teresa Gaspar², and Filipe Antunes¹

Introduction: Pain after stroke is a very debilitating and underestimated condition, affecting patients’ quality of life. For its complex character, the main challenge is to recognize its prevalence and its developing process so as to enable an early approach and avoid its chronification.

Methods: A systematic review of the literature was completed using PubMed database, with 59 studies identified regarding the main causes of chronic pain after stroke, diagnostic strategies and therapeutic attitudes.

Results: A variety of direct and indirect processes can underlie pain after stroke. Previous musculoskeletal pathology that worsens due to neurological deficits, hemiplegic shoulder pain, pain related to spastic limbs and neuropathic pain (such as central pain and type I complex regional pain syndrome) are the main causes of post stroke chronic pain. Hemiplegic shoulder pain is the most common one and accounts for about 70-80% of them. Because of their own clinical and pathophysiologic particularities, each is to be individually approached and treated.

Conclusion: Pain after stroke is not negligible. For its prevalence and impairment both in quality of life and rehabilitation process, it is essential to recognize the main causes as well as the diagnostic strategies and subsequent therapeutic alternatives.