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Self-reflection, rehabilitation and returning to fitness: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of stroke survivors' experiences

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Each year, over 100,000 individuals suffer strokes in the United Kingdom alone, and it is estimated that by 2035, not only will there be a 59% increase in the number of first-time strokes amongst individuals of 45 years and over, but also that there will be a significant increase in the proportion of survivors thereby requiring effective rehabilitation (Sentinel Stroke National Audit Programme (SSNAP)). Contemporary research has indicated, however, that many of the rehabilitation schemes currently provided can be somewhat variable in approach, and often focus strongly upon regaining physiological function at the expense of assisting patients with the more psychological and social elements essential to their recovery. Indeed, stroke survivors have reported particular dissatisfaction with their rehabilitation in terms of a lack of help with stress-management and access to social support mechanisms. There is, thus, further research needed into the complex experiences of individuals who have undergone stroke rehabilitation in order to better understand their nuanced needs, and how these were met (or not met) by the services provided. Therefore, this study aimed to explore extended, semi-structured interviews, reflecting on personal experiences of stroke and subsequent rehabilitation, with the purpose of drawing conclusions to potentially form a basis for further research. The reported study used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore interviews with $n=4$ individuals (2 males and 2 females) who have (a) experienced a stroke in the last five years, and have (b) now fully completed their formal rehabilitation programmes, i.e. are no longer under regular NHS care. These participants are, thus, in an ideal position to provide a full account of, and reflection upon, their journey through the rehabilitation process. All interviews were conducted and recorded via telephone, while all collected data were handled in strict accordance with the institutional ethical conditions set-out for the

project, stored in line with General Data Protection regulation (GDPR), and analysed using the standard conventions of IPA. Although analysis remains in progress at this time, it is currently clear that, for the participants, the rehabilitative experience was influenced by the manner in which they conceptualized their pre-stroke identities. Perceived difficulties within the process were most notable where participants felt that they were not being identified as an individual. Given such observations, it is contended that the results and subsequent conclusions made could potentially influence further research into the structure and delivery of stroke rehabilitation.