

The ANGELS Journey



100 REGIONS | DECEMBER 2027



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Too Close for Comfort

Welcome

to the March edition of the Angels Journey 2025.



“I’d just been diagnosed with the exact same condition that had lead to Andrea having a stroke and being unable to speak or work for two years!”

On January 30 this year, I had the privilege of attending the regional celebration in Savona, Italy, which had been crowned the first Italian region to achieve Angels Region status. Joining us for the event and the dinner the night before was Andrea Vianello, president of the stroke patient organization ALICE.

Andrea, who used to be a famous TV presenter, was ripped away from that life when he suffered a stroke after developing a carotid artery dissection, most likely caused by a chiropractic manipulation. We all hung onto his every word as he recounted to the audience the story of how he fell out of bed and being unable to say his childrens' names for two years after the stroke. Andrea joked that if he ever had kids again, he would give them names that were easier to pronounce. His story was inspirational, but little did I know it would soon become a story that would haunt my own dreams.

Exactly a week after celebrating with Andrea in Italy, I had come down from my home office to have lunch with my family when my wife asked, “What’s wrong with your eye?” I had no clue what she was on about, but I was shocked when I looked into the

mirror and realized that my right eye was drooping quite badly and that my two pupils were not the same size.

My wife recommended that I call one of the neurologists I knew, so I called Valeria Caso on FaceTime. Valeria took one look at me and said she suspected I had something called Horner’s syndrome and that I should get to the hospital as soon as possible. I did as I was told and spent the next couple of hours in the emergency department at the Uni Clinic in Mainz, where they quickly did a CT scan and realized that I had two dissections – one in the internal carotid and a smaller one in the vertebral artery. Next thing I knew, I found myself in a place where I never in a million years thought I would be – admitted as a patient in a stroke unit.

The term “ignorance is bliss” took on a new meaning for me as I began dealing with the fact that I’d just

been diagnosed with the exact same condition that had led to Andrea having a stroke and being unable to speak or work for two years!

Can you imagine the thought of being forced to “park” your life for that amount of time and waking up with the realization that life as you knew it was over?

I can tell you, that Friday night when I was admitted to the stroke unit in Mainz, I did not close an eye as I was too afraid that I was going to wake up paralyzed like Andrea. I cannot tell you how difficult it is to put all your hope in one little 100mg tablet of Aspirin per day to keep you stroke-free. Luckily for me, God had other plans. As many neurologists have told me since, I must be one of the luckiest people alive today to have had dissections of two arteries, with partial Horner’s syndrome, and not have a stroke.

The Angels Initiative

The Angels Initiative is a healthcare intervention dedicated to improving stroke patients' chances of survival and a disability-free life. Since 2016, an estimated 16 million patients have been treated in over 8,000 Angels hospitals worldwide, including more than 1,400 new stroke-ready hospitals established across the world with the help of Angels.

Find out more by visiting angels-initiative.com

What does one make of it when you dodge a bullet? I feel like someone who survived a plane crash. My mind still plays tricks on me, and every time I inadvertently sit on my foot, for example, and cause it to fall asleep, I have this huge adrenaline rush thinking that it's the first sign of a stroke.

When I read Ángel Corredor's story in this edition of The Angels Journey of how his uncle, the powerful farmer, had his life ruined because of a stroke, it sends shivers down my spine, but it also gives me a new resolve.

Having this close call reminded me of what I learned twelve years ago, seeing the impact my mother-in-law's stroke had on our family. It's only when it touches you personally that you realize the finality of its impact. And it's for this reason that I am today even more inspired and driven to fight this disease together with all of you.

It brings tears to my eyes to see how many amazing people are fighting with us. This community is making a difference from the Algarve to Slovakia, from Kenya to Colombia, and as far east as Indonesia and beyond.

Why was I spared? I have no clue, but as a friend told me, now you know why you are involved with Angels. There is still a lot of work to be done. So, let's go do it.



Jan van der Merwe
Co-Founder & Project Lead
– The Angels Initiative

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Call to action in the Algarve

Opportunity met courage in the beautiful Algarve which, as well as having arguably the best beaches in Portugal, is also the country's first Angels Region.

THE first Angels Region in Portugal was built out of many disparate pieces – a major hospital that had temporarily lost its award status after becoming a comprehensive center, a smaller hospital that had lost its stroke unit, and a fractured EMS service partly staffed with firefighters and volunteers.

Angels consultant Inês Carvalho took a tactical approach to turn the glorious Algarve into a safe region for stroke – but the result, she says, is due to people who were willing to lead and who responded to opportunity with courage.

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This hospital has long been a **bright spot in the Portuguese stroke community.**

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Algarve Central Hospital in the regional capital Faro has been an Angels success story since at least 2019 when it became the third hospital in Portugal to meet the criteria for an ESO Angels Award. Consultancy at this hospital had begun in 2016, immediately after Angels was launched in Europe. Supported by then consultant Claudia Queiroga, the hospital implemented the key priority actions in their stroke pathway and in 2020 won their first diamond award.

In 2022 the hospital sought ESO certification as a route to becoming a comprehensive center. A mechanical thrombectomy service was introduced in 2023, but in Q2 of 2024 the hospital came up empty-handed when the new service failed to meet awards criteria. A multidisciplinary meeting analyzed the data and set new targets for door-to-groin times. By Q3, Faro was back in contention and in the journey to Angels Region status, an important box had been ticked.

Under the leadership of Dr Ana Paula Fidalgo, who is now the hospital's clinical director, and Dr Ana Varela who has succeeded her as stroke coordinator, this hospital has long been a bright spot in the Portuguese stroke community. Dr Fidalgo is also

a strong ally of FAST Heroes whose example has encouraged other doctors and nurses to get involved in the schools-based stroke awareness campaign. As a result, the FAST Heroes implementation targets for Angels Region status were easily met, with almost 900 children educated about stroke in 2024.

Inês notes that in areas where the campaign has already been implemented, the average symptom-to-door time for stroke patients is 165 minutes, compared with the national average of 208 minutes. It's not an exact science yet, but a hunch will tell you that a correlation between public awareness and stroke patients arriving in the emergency room sooner, is no coincidence.



From left, Nurse Solange Mega, Nurse Marco Piedade, Inês, Nurse Sandra Nunes and Dr Luis Vicente.



Team Portugal at ESOC 2023 in Munich where Dr Isabel Taveira (seated, left) was nominated for a Spirit of Excellence Award.

Inês opened her Angels Regions strategy with a formal invitation to stakeholders that explained what was at stake. After setting out the goals, she wrote, "This challenge will not only enhance the quality of stroke care in our region but also set a benchmark for others to follow." It was a call to action that was impossible to refuse.

The invitation was important for several reasons, Inês says. "It had to feel meaningful and clarify strategy. It also had to make clear that this was a special project and that the time spent on it was justified."

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As for the outcome, "success story" doesn't begin to describe it.

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Her abilities as a tactician would face its toughest test when it came to the EMS service which in this region is composed of many small units not all of whom were enthusiastic about working together. This made it difficult to standardize care, Inês says, and mandatory training was out of the question. Low awareness among some of the technicians, firefighters and volunteers who staffed the ambulances meant strokes were missed; not everyone was familiar with the Cincinnati scale, and not everyone was keen to adopt the iTeams system of digital reporting to replace the unreliable paper system.

Workshops and simulations were held in Faro and Portimão, where

participants were also able to raise concerns in small groups. Some of these concerns were related to hierarchy, making it difficult, for example, for firefighters to be heard regarding issues with hospitals, Inês explains. As for the outcome, "success story" doesn't begin to describe it. The EMS service in Algarve now holds two diamond awards and during an important stroke conference in February, doctors in the audience spontaneously gave a standing ovation to the firefighters collecting their award. It was gesture of deep significance, and an indicator of how the Angels Regions approach of working towards a common goal can impact communities.

There's a success story unfolding, too, in the port city of Portimão, where last year a hospital that had no stroke unit until 2023, won two diamond awards. It's another case of courage meeting opportunity in the person of Dr Isabel Taveira, whom Inês describes as a "very tenacious, very motivated" young doctor who in her drive for stroke care excellence at her hospital puts in an extra effort and hours. Being stubborn and motivated had served Dr Taveira well in her campaign to have a stroke unit established at her hospital, but by early 2023 she was close to giving up. Inês realized that recognition of Dr Taveira's efforts by the wider stroke community could give her a bigger platform in her own hospital, and nominated her for an ESO Spirit of Excellence Award. Being honored at ESOC 2023 in Munich, alongside stroke heroes such as Prof Aleš Tomek of the Czech Republic and Prof Giorgios Tsigoulis of Greece, led to the breakthrough Portimão had been waiting for.

Yes, she is a strategist, Inês confirms. "I try to make a map of influencers and the good relationships they have.



Understanding who the key people are and the influence they have, can help you reach others who may be reluctant to work with Angels."

It is just as important to give recognition to people, she says, recalling the goosebumps moment at the stroke conference. "If you do this, people are more open to change."

And nothing is quite as important as showing up. "I don't email, I call," Inês says. She also spends more time at hospitals than she can strictly afford to, but not a minute of it is wasted. "It is very important to be seen," she says, "to be there in person."

Ensuring the Algarve maintains its Angels Region status is now in the hands of a regional steering committee whose members have each been given a folder with relevant materials and responsibility for a specific area such as quality monitoring, awareness and so on. It is here that Inês played a strategic masterstroke by involving the stroke patients society in the committee. No one understands the importance of integrated stroke care more viscerally than someone who has survived a stroke, giving them a unique role in the regional body.

As Inês says, "They may not know medicine, but they know their rights."



A night to remember

These pictures tell the story of a community that worked together to make Savona province Italy's first Angels Region, and held a memorable gathering to celebrate each other's and their own success.



Silvia Ripamonti, Angels team leader for Bulgaria, Romania, Greece and Italy, presented the regional strategy and goals that took Savona to Angels Region status. Region status requires that hospitals and EMS in the stroke network meet the minimum standard for an ESO or EMS Angels Award, and sets targets for FAST Heroes implementation. Elisa Salvati, the Angels consultant responsible for the region, is on the left.

FINALBORGO in northwest Italy is considered one of the most beautiful villages in Italy and the pearl of Western Liguria. It is in this splendid medieval village that a momentous gathering took place on 31 January. This was a celebration attended by the very people who were being celebrated – the community that had worked together to make this picturesque part of the western Ligurian Riviera the first Angels Region in Italy.



Angels co-founder and global project lead Jan van der Merwe (here with Angels consultant Elisa Salvati) thanked the big and small heroes in the audience for their role in making Savona a safe region for stroke.

The Angels Regions strategy is informed by the idea that "if one doesn't do it, no one can do it". Or put another way, for one to succeed, everyone must succeed. Everyone in the Auditorium di Santa Caterina had played a role in achieving Angels Region status for Savona. These included more than 50 children and their teachers along with mayors and municipal councillors, directors of neurology and neuroradiology departments, doctors and nurses, EMS, coordinators of the regional stroke network and of the Italian Stroke Association, and the president and representatives of the stroke patient association, ALICe.



Students from the schools Dottor Sordo, Papa Giovanni XXIII and Primaria Borgio Verezzi sang the FAST Heroes song about stroke symptoms and the "magic" number 112 to call an ambulance.



Papa Giovanni XIII is second on the FAST Heroes leaderboard for Italy. Here they enjoy a moment of the celebration with their teachers and the president of ALICE, Andrea Vianello.



A special moment for proud teachers Gloria Fossati and Livia Pastorino from Dottor Sordo and Papa Giovanni XXIII in Pietra Ligure, and Barbara Parodi from Borgio Verezzi. With them on the right is Andrea Vianello, president of the stroke patient association, ALICE.



The EMS team 118 Savona Soccorso achieved diamond status in the EMS Angels Award in quarters two and four of 2024. Here their director, Dr Danilo Cimoloto, receives the award from Jan van der Merwe. Angels consultant for the region, Elisa Salvati, is on the right.



Dr Tiziana Tassinari (second from right) is director of Neurology and the Stroke Unit at the Santa Corona hospital in Pietra Ligure. Since 2020, her hospital has won six gold and two platinum awards. She is joined by (from left) Elisa Salvati, Jan van der Merwe and Silvia Ripamonti.



Dr Giuseppina Manno is head teacher of the Istituto Comprensivo Pietra Ligure, one of six schools that helped the province of Savona become an Angels Region.



From left, Elisa Salvati, Jan van der Merwe, Andrea Vianello of the patient association ALICE, Dr Tiziana Tassinari, Director of Neurology and the Stroke Unit at the Santa Corona hospital in Pietra Ligure, Silvia Ripamonti and Prof. Massimo Del Sette, coordinator of the Italian Stroke Association (ISA-AII) Liguria.



They made it happen. Living proof of the power of community are Barbara Parodi, Livia Pastorino, Maria Luisa De Giorgi, Caterina Maffongelli, Danilo Cimoloto, Cinzia Finocchi, Tiziana Tassinari, Riccardo Padolecchia, Elisa Salvati, Silvia Ripamonti, Jan van der Merwe, Mauro Boetto, Michela Vignone, Veronica Aicardi and Luigi De Vincenzi.

The light in their eyes

Achieving Angels Region status in two counties in Hungary was the result of key people, good relationships, and the legacy left by her predecessor, says rookie consultant Zsófia Reichert.

BARELY seven months after becoming an Angels consultant, something Zsófia Reichert seems quite certain of, is that it's people who create change.

Not standardized practices, although they help shrink the change. Not new protocols, even though they're necessary to help deliver change. Not even quality monitoring, although without it you wouldn't know where to start or how far you still had to go.

"Key people matter," she says about the process that saw Baranya and Somogy, two counties in south-western Hungary, become the first Angels Regions in her country, and among the first 15 in the world.

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For anyone to succeed,
everyone must succeed.

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The right people can change the entire conversation about stroke.

People are at the heart of the 100 Angels Regions strategy, with its focus on creating safe communities for stroke. To become an Angels Region, targets must be met in four categories – hospital coverage, hospital performance, EMS performance and public awareness. With better outcomes for stroke patients as their shared goal, leaders at hospitals and emergency services, in schools and local government have to work together – because for anyone to succeed, everyone must succeed.

Zsófia was “born into” the regions strategy, joining Angels just days before the goal to convert 100 regions by 2027 was formally announced at ESOC in Basel last May. She had a lot to think about on the trip home from Basel to Budapest where fortunately, despite being the only consultant in Hungary, she was not completely alone.

Her predecessor Zsolt Lakatos had left a legacy for Zsófia to build on, and he made himself available to

share his wisdom and experience.

Zsolt's work as an Angels consultant had included interventions in Baranya and Somogy which were now well on the way to becoming Angels Regions. Somogy County Kaposi Mór Teaching Hospital and the University of Pécs Clinical Centre in Baranya were comprehensive centres and in terms of access to treatment, adequately served the populations in their respective counties. Both had achieved ESO Angels Awards in 2024.

Although the boxes were therefore already ticked for hospital coverage and performance, Zsófia listened intently to Zsolt's insights about the merits of a person-centered approach and how adopting an emergency mindset helps optimize the stroke pathway.

Zsolt's strategy had been to identify potential change-makers at target hospitals, invite them to attend Angels-facilitated training, and



then ask them to train others. The experience made these doctors more serious about stroke care, and prepared to set an example. Bright spots became leaders.

The approach resonated with Zsófia. She finds it easy to put herself in the shoes of someone young and perhaps feeling a little overwhelmed who knows they can make a difference if given the chance. And she's been around long enough to know what a beautiful thing it is when you reach someone's soul and they start to change. She says, "You can see the light in their eyes."

In Hungary, she says, "if you give people a chance you will find a lot of stars."

Among the stars who light her way are some who have been shining brightly for some time. Zsófia has found an invaluable ally in Dr László Szapáry, head of stroke at the University of Pécs Clinical Centre, president of the Hungarian Stroke Society and a 2021 recipient of the ESO Spirit of Excellence Award. Dr Szapáry is also Hungary's RES-Q coordinator, and a member of the Angels Steering Committee in Europe. He is very effective at facilitating communication between Angels and the Hungarian stroke community and Zsófia is deeply grateful for his involvement and active support.

Key people matter.

Good relationships matter too.

A picture taken at the October 2024 conference of the European Society for Emergency Medicine (EUSEM), is one that will almost

certainly be kept and shared with future generations. In it, Zsófia is being literally carried on the steady hands of Hungary's diamond award winning EMS chiefs. It's a picture so filled with goodwill and collegiality it's hard to believe that some of them she had only just met.

The Hungarian National Ambulance Service, the OMSZ, is already the stuff of legends. They made history in 2023 when all seven regions of the OMSZ won diamond awards – testimony to the director-general Dr Gábor Csató's innovative leadership, the embrace of AI-driven performance analysis and improvement, and of course their hard work.

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This job really gives me the feeling that I'm not just improving at a professional level, but also at a personal level.

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Prior to 2024 the OMSZ only submitted their data in March, but Zsófia encouraged them to take part in the global data collection activation, Angels Insights Month, in September as well. Just in case you were wondering how the Hungarian heroes turned seven diamonds into fourteen last year.

The final piece of the puzzle would turn out to be the hardest one. Due to uncertainty surrounding data reporting processes, it was initially difficult to verify the data for FAST Heroes implementation (necessary to meet the awareness target for Angels Regions). When it emerged that there was a gap to be closed, a massive last-minute effort got Baranya and Somogy over the line and into the record books before the end of 2024.

Barely seven months after becoming an Angels consultant, Zsófia Reichert knows that change is hard and changing can be even harder.

"It's been a long journey from any perspective," she says of a rollercoaster year that included a September wedding. "This job really gives me the feeling that I'm not just improving at a professional level, but also at a personal level. I keep feeling my borders are pushing me far from my comfort zone.

"Sometimes it's not so convenient. Changing can mean hard times."

Zsófia hopes that the new year will bring more balance into her life and that focusing on physical as well as spiritual health will reflect in her work too.

"I have to believe that I am doing my best," she says, acknowledging that she can be hard on herself. Accustomed to measuring herself against her peers, as the only consultant in her territory she's had to adapt to rating her performance against herself and to keep improving by her own standards.

Being part of a bigger team helps. She can count on the support and encouragement from colleagues in her territory and in the core team, and on Zsolt cheering her on from the sideline.

In her first full year as a consultant, Zsófia will work with a large number of hospitals including, in Budapest, a diamond hospital whose reputation precedes them. She has heard about the boundary-pushing achievements at Péterfy Hospital and has met some of the diamond-winning team at local congresses.

"They're really motivated to be first," she says.

She cannot wait to learn from them.





From Slovakia

Leading by example

If you want to know how to win 10 consecutive diamond awards, the answer is here. Matej Polák, director of ZaMED, shares his toolbox with five common sense actions, and a very important piece of advice.

THEY didn't expect it to be easy, says Matej Polák, director of Slovakia's leading provider of prehospital care. "We didn't want to walk the easy way. The easiest road is always down the hill – it won't get you to the top."

The top is indeed where you will find ten-times diamond winner ZaMED whose record of success in the EMS Angels Award is unbeaten and probably unbeatable. But their reputation precedes the awards. When the EMS Angels Awards were launched in Lisbon in 2021, partly as the result of Matej's advocacy, Komárno, where ZaMED is headquartered, was already synonymous with excellence in prehospital care. Their principles had been adopted as the national guidelines for Slovakia,

and Komárno Rescue, their annual competition that tests the skills of the best rescue teams in Central Europe, was drawing more participating teams every year.

A close ally of Angels from the start, Matej had been convinced



The **total number of awards is about to pass the 500 mark**, and the winners include teams from Pichinca province in Ecuador to Da Nang in Vietnam.



that the positive impact of the ESO and WSO Angels Awards on in-hospital stroke care could be replicated in the prehospital setting. It wasn't possible to incentivize performance with money or vacations, but Matej believed the combination of personal pride and public recognition would do the trick. The bragging rights that came with winning an international award would help motivate change and encourage paramedics to take the most important step towards change – the first one.

It worked.





Four diamond winners in Lisbon had grown to 45 by Q4 of 2024. The total number of awards is about to pass the 500 mark, and the winners include teams from Pichinca province in Ecuador to Da Nang in Vietnam, from Hong Kong to Chile, from South Africa to Kazakhstan. In cities and regions around the world, more stroke patients are reaching the right hospitals at the right time.

Did the awards exceed Matej's expectations?

They did not.

They did however meet his expectations, says Matej, noting that these expectations had been very high.

A simple tool set

"High achievement always takes place in the framework of high expectation," said American engineer Charles Kettering, whose brilliant inventions revolutionized the automobile industry. Within ZaMED the expectations of excellence are high indeed, with monitoring and feedback central to their model. What they have managed to do is infect their employees with the same belief in holding themselves to a higher standard.

"They are competing against each other for who has the shortest time on scene, they compete to be as fast as possible. Our employees now want to get better themselves and they have the tools for it."

Those tools are simple, Matej insists. "We didn't invent anything special. Many others use the same tools, maybe just not as consistently or in the same combination or long enough."

So here, from the horse's mouth, are the five tools that, if you use them consistently, could bag you 10 diamond awards:

1 Awareness

They put a lot of effort into raising public awareness about stroke and, among their members, awareness of the importance of EMS care for stroke patients, Matej says. "Ten years ago, stroke wasn't perceived by paramedics as a super sexy great job. These guys loved blood and broken bones more." Stroke patients are generally silent and often don't look like emergency patients, which is why it's important to make the EMS teams aware that these are cases where every minute counts.

2 Education

It's not enough to be aware, you have to know what to do, Matej says. They are strong believers in the value and impact of education. Before Angels, they created their own learning tools, but they now use Angels elearnings, in particular the ASLS course, and compensate ZaMED paramedics who complete the course. They are also, in partnership with the University of Miami, the only ASLS educators in Slovakia.

3 Quality monitoring

When it comes to quality monitoring, ZaMED goes deep. They monitor performance for 100 percent of their stroke care, which means scrutinizing all the records for every case, and reviewing all the steps, including selecting the right hospital and prenotifying them.

4 Feedback

Feedback is provided to every employee for every case, Matej says, adding that changing attitudes towards feedback "in a post-socialist society" had been their biggest challenge. They had to convince their workforce that feedback wasn't negative but in fact a chance to become better.

"Feedback is the most important thing," says ZaMED education coordinator Patrik Brna whose responsibilities span points 2 to 4 – education, quality monitoring and feedback. It's no wonder he doesn't get to work as many shifts

in the field as he would like. Patrik believes it's thanks to feedback that ZaMED paramedics now approach stroke cases as a challenge, trying to outdo each other in the field. The feedback process is also activated for cases of myocardial infarction and resuscitation – one of several instances of stroke best practices having spread to other areas of emergency care.

5 Motivation

Good work deserves praise, preferably in public – which is one of the premises of the EMS Angels Awards. Winning makes people look good and feel good. "They're the cherry on top," Patrik says of the awards, but adds a disclaimer: "The system is the cake. If the system works, if the patient gets the best quality treatment, that is what matters. Diamonds are fancy but the important thing is the patient."

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I am happy that we became an example, or maybe an inspiration for others. I have been surprised to learn how important a positive example is.

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More winning

Patrik is one of the key organizers of the Komárno Rescue, an event he got to know as a competitor before joining ZaMED five years ago, and of which he is now the main referee. The competition, which was launched in 2013, tests paramedics' technical and decision-making skills, teamwork and resilience in a series of tasks that simulate real-life situations including stroke. Feedback is instant, which means learning is instant. But Komárno Rescue is also a celebration of their work, Patrik says. It's quality time with team mates and an opportunity for experience-sharing, brainstorming and making new friends.

Last year's event was the biggest yet – with 26 teams from five countries competing, including Czech Republic, Austria, Hungary and Slovenia – but the trophy stayed in Slovakia thanks to a winning team from ZaMED.



The first step is always the hardest and is rarely perfect. But the most important thing about the first step is that it happened.



To people who say winning is easy in Slovakia because it's an EU country, Matej is quick to point out that the Slovak Republic is one of the poorest nations in the EU. The largest part of their "own" hospital in Komárno was already over 100 years old back in 2014 when their stroke door-to-treatment times beat those of most hospitals in Europe – "it looked like a castle."

It's not about resources, he says. "It's about the mental strength to improve."

More advice

That ZaMED is the only EMS so far to have earned 10 consecutive diamonds surprised him,

Matej says. "I expected many would be that good. On the other hand, it has made me happy to learn how much influence a positive example can have.

"I am happy that we became an example, or maybe an inspiration for others. I have been surprised to learn how important a positive example is."

Does he have more advice besides his five-point plan? Yes, he does.

"Just begin," he counsels. "Don't wait until you can imagine the whole road to a 100 percent result. Begin even if not all the areas have been solved. Don't wait for the 100 percent plan.

"Your effort will bring results even if it is not all satisfactory, and you

will solve the rest along the way. I have seen people stop working on improvement just because of some doubt over a single issue – even though the rest of their plan for getting better was perfect. Not knowing how you will resolve all the issues is not a reason not to begin.

"The first step is always the hardest and is rarely perfect. But the most important thing about the first step is that it happened."

And for those still uncertain about where to begin, he adds: "Just do our five common sense things, it isn't rocket science. You can improve things one by one, solve problems one by one, deal with other issues one by one.

"But don't wait. Begin!"



Matej Polák (left) and Patrik Brna with one year's worth of diamond awards.



From Kenya

It's time for Africa

In November 2024, the mission to change the reality for stroke patients around the world finally put down roots in East Africa. For Angels cofounder and global project leader Jan van der Merwe it was the realization of a longheld dream. For the stroke communities in Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana and Ethiopia, it was only the beginning.



ANGELS consultant in Kenya Annie Kariuki had been in her position less than a month when the first Angels Train the Trainer event in East Africa pushed her in at the deep end.

There was to be no soft landing for this “baby Angel” as new consultants are sometimes referred to. Instead, the immersive experience of cohosting her first Train the Trainer event fast-tracked her introduction to the world of stroke care transformation and gave her the momentum she will need to tackle one of the toughest challenges in the Angels universe.

Only a handful of the 30 healthcare professionals who attended the event currently treat acute stroke, says the Angels core team’s Rita Rodrigues who, together with her colleague Madeline Bucher, had traveled to Nairobi to support the event.

But it was not for a lack of courage or skill.

“We found these doctors were knowledgeable about the treatment including the latest research and when using the virtual patient simulator Body Interact they were highly capable of decision making and working as a

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She didn't live near a city,” Annie explains. “So when she went to the nearest hospital, **they said they couldn't help her.**

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team,” Rita said, adding that “they showed a strong will to collaborate”.

Most patients however arrive outside the treatment window, often two to three days after their stroke. If they do arrive in time for life-saving treatment, scrambling to find the money to pay for the treatment (which currently isn't reimbursed by governments) squanders whatever precious time is left.

Annie is a microbiologist and not a neuroscientist, but she has first-hand experience of how difficult it can be to access acute treatment, and the devastation that follows in the wake of stroke. She was a teenager when her grandmother, after first complaining of a headache, began to show the signs of stroke.

"She didn't live near a city," Annie explains. "So when she went to the nearest hospital, they said they couldn't help her." Doctors referred them to a bigger hospital where the same thing happened: Annie's grandma was told to go to a hospital in the capital city. "By the time she got to the right hospital it was too late. She was permanently disabled on her left side, and I watched her become a shell of the vibrant person she used to be."

Annie, who during the Covid pandemic worked on the frontline as an advanced emergency medical technician, applied to join Angels about a year after her grandmother passed away, and can now help shape a future where more grandmothers in East Africa will reach the right hospital in time.

To support the training in Nairobi, Jan and his team had invited two international stroke experts – Dr Francisco "Pachi" Moniche, stroke coordinator at renowned Hospital Virgen del Rocio in Seville, Spain, and Dr Louis Kroon of Sub-Saharan Africa's first diamond-awarded public hospital, Steve Biko Academic in Pretoria. They headlined a training agenda that included an introduction to stroke guidelines followed by parallel workshops on CT imaging, stroke pathway optimization, and post-acute care including the Arrow Project that was developed in Spain to standardize stroke unit nursing.



An NIHSS workshop on day two showed a marked improvement in the accuracy achieved by participations after instruction by Dr Kroon. "A great teacher makes a great student. We are grateful for the opportunity," Dr Kodichimma Onwuka, an internal medicine specialist at the University of Nigeria Teaching Hospital, commented in the event app.

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I went in prepared to learn and to network," Annie says. "Although I still have a lot to learn, I can already make a difference."

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Drs Kroon and Moniche also conducted the patient simulations that concluded day two, which saw Annie and team leader Matteusz Stolarczyk from Poland shine in the respective roles of concerned wife and stricken patient.

Annie barely had time to let it all sink in. "If you need anything, talk to Annie," Jan had said in his opening presentation, and the delegates took him at his word. While fielding questions and invitations, Annie took joy

in seeing participants enjoy the presentations, hearing the feedback and sharing the website resources which the attendees were surprised to learn were free.

"I went in prepared to learn and to network," Annie says. "Although I still have a lot to learn, I can already make a difference. My background isn't in stroke care but the doctors I talk to can see the value and that pushes me to be even more dedicated to becoming an expert."

Matt encouraged Annie to use the momentum generated by the event to fortify relationships with the stroke community, and she has been delighted to encounter more goodwill in the hospitals she has visited. "Doctors will tell their colleagues, 'Annie will help us,'" she says. The embrace of the local stroke community has been swift and warm.

Rita and Madeline, too, were struck by the positive tone that permeated the event. "There was a strong sense of optimism," they report. "Participants were sharing their problems but not in a pessimistic way. They weren't complaining, just sharing, and they were finding solutions within the group."

Indeed, when it came to Africa's reputation for valuing community and sharing its burdens and benefits, the gathering did not disappoint. Annie says: "Doctors from one hospital would say we have this challenge, and then someone from another hospital



would say, this is how we overcome that.”

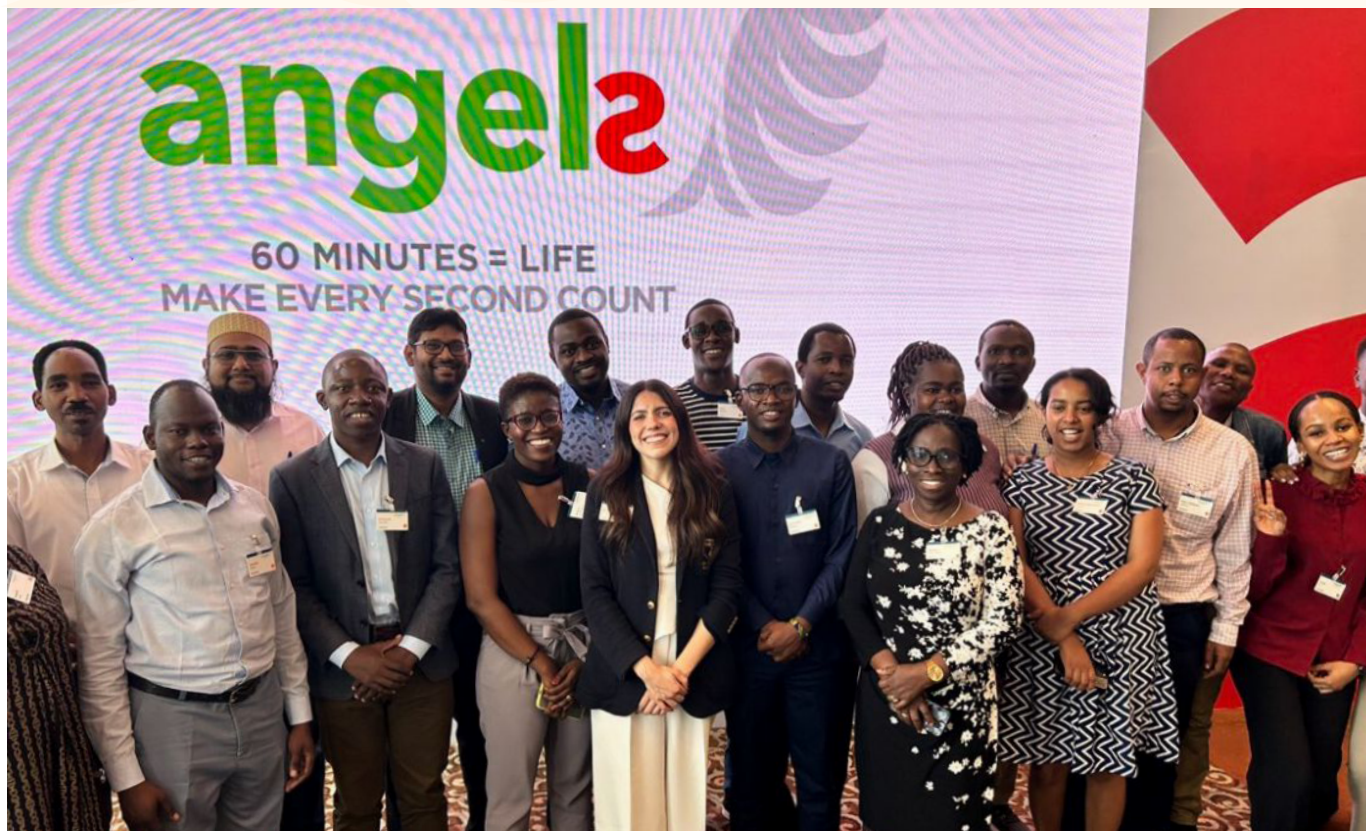
She also felt the power of the Angels community: “It felt real, the sense that we do have support, even here in Kenya.”

Making treatment affordable will be a key objective in this as in other developing regions, and it's one that will ultimately need government support. A stroke can wipe out a family's income and support system in an instant, with vast costs accumulating to society and the economy. To influence policy, authorities need to be made aware of this burden and become convinced that there is a solution that works.

“We need to have a success,” Rita says.

They made not have very long to wait. The Angels journey in East Africa may have only just started, but if the first event is anything to go by, community holds the key and success is the destination.

The first Angels event in East Africa was an occasion marked by positivity and solution-focused optimism.



A flame in the soul

As a student on his first shift in the ER, Dr Ángel Corredor heard an answer he didn't accept and saw a future he didn't want. Then he set out to change it.

ABOUT nine years ago, Dr Ángel Corredor happened to visit a medium-sized city located on Colombia's famous coffee-growing axis, and decided that this was where he wanted to live.



A walkable city surrounded by snow-capped mountain peaks and rain forests, Armenia reminded him of Cúcuta, the city on the border with Venezuela where he'd been born and raised.

Figuring he had nothing to lose, and a lot to learn and grow, Dr. Corredor presented himself at the University Hospital San Juan de Dios to ask if they had a job for a neurologist from Bogotá. They might, they said, and promised to call after a month. The call came eight months later, long after Dr. Corredor had stopped expecting it, and in February 2017 he settled in the city he would eventually place on the global stroke map.

But when he arrived the hospital had no stroke service. Stroke patients were treated as if beset by "a mysterious clinical condition" that excited no urgency or alarm.

It was a throwback to his first shift in an emergency department when he was still a student. When a stroke

patient was brought in, one hour after symptom onset, he readied himself for a rapid sequence of CT scan followed by thrombolysis, only to be told to relax – "We don't do that here."

Having studied medicine in the expectation of being able to "do something to help someone else's suffering", he didn't accept the answer, Dr. Corredor says. This was not the future he had in mind.

Years later in Armenia Dr. Corredor learned something that is known to

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You have to organize your house before you receive visitors.

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everyone who has tried to change the future, namely that people don't listen to you just because you're right. Recognizing that he needed a different plan, he put his faith in the future doctors he was teaching. He would show them what he believed and make them believe in it too.

Organizing the house

"You have to organize your house before you receive visitors," he says philosophically of what would end up as a five-year project to transform stroke management in Armenia. In 2019, an Angels-facilitated preceptorship at Carlos Molina's Barcelona hospital made him realize how far he still had to go – "I realized I was in diapers," he says. The following year, he turned the challenges of triaging stroke patients with Covid into an opportunity to demonstrate the merits of an organized stroke pathway.

Organizing his house also meant training for everyone, from doctors

and nurses to security guards; collecting data in RES-Q – a task he carried out himself, sometimes with the assistance of students, or helped by his wife in the evenings; and forming a virtual network of young doctors including former students he had infected with his ideas.

Fielding texts at all hours from young doctors seeking advice and support gave Dr. Corredor another insight familiar to people who try to change the future – the realization, at once terrifying and exhilarating, that “if I don’t do it, no one else will”.

But in 2022, when a new future was finally in view for stroke care in Armenia, a financial decision was made to suspend the stroke service at his hospital. For the first time in five years, Dr. Corredor considered giving up.

‘You will say yes’

The turning point was a phone call from Angels consultant Claudia Guazaquillo, an important support for Dr. Corredor in the organization of an education plan. Claudia had something to show him on the website that managed the mortality indicators for different diseases in Colombia. Pre-2017, the graph for Armenia was erratic, with a lot of missing data. But from 2017 onwards, the line representing stroke mortality curved steadily downwards.

Ángel saw what Claudia wanted him to see – that thanks to the hard work, the long hours and the late-night calls, fewer people were dying.

In June 2022 he joined a private hospital in Armenia, the Clínica Central del Quindío, where he had

agreed to establish a stroke centre on two conditions. The first was that he would need a dedicated person to collect data. The second was that no stroke patient would be turned away, irrespective of whether they had insurance or not. “You will say yes because it’s an emergency,” Dr. Corredor told his new employers.

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in September 2023 Clínica Central del Quindío became the **first hospital in the region to be certified by the World Stroke Organization.**

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A year later in September 2023 Clínica Central del Quindío became the first hospital in the region to be certified by the World Stroke Organization, an achievement soon followed by their first WSO Angels Award. Dr. Corredor used the momentum created by international recognition to expand the stroke service and solve a problem that had been bothering him for some time.

Clínica Central del Quindío had no thrombectomy service, which meant that patients with large vessel occlusion had to be referred to a hospital two hours away. Thanks to an optimized emergency



transport service, of the 12 patients that had been referred to the comprehensive centre, 85 percent had left hospital with a Modified Rankin Score score of 0-2, indicating slight or no disability. Imagine what could be achieved if they could treat these patients themselves.

A bigger stage

Dr Corredor’s efforts were meanwhile starting to attract national and international attention. To his surprise he was selected as academic coordinator for the Stroke Group of the Colombian Association of Neurology. He learnt more about his own capacity for leadership as one of the young neurologists in the forefront of ALATAC, a professional organization that seeks to resolve disparities in stroke care in Latin America. And he was set a task within the WSO.

A long-standing advocate of exercise for stroke prevention, his first foray into awareness activations had been a local 6 km run against stroke. Inspired by witnessing “more than 240 people running for my ideas”, he began to dream of a world marathon against stroke and, having proposed the idea to former WSO president Prof Sheila Martins, found himself co-chair of the WSO Campaign Committee behind 2024’s #GreaterThanStroke challenge.

With his private hospital on course for four consecutive diamond awards during 2024, the new Angels Regions strategy saw Dr. Corredor expand his influence to the ambulance service, schools and local authorities. Local government support is essential if Armenia is to become an Angels Region – perhaps Colombia’s first – and Dr Corredor is becoming adept at appealing to political vanity to win support for his ideas.



Better stroke care must be an order not just a wish, he says, so it can function independently of his presence and influence.

His drivers are both moral and personal, his vision both global and local. "I believe I must be useful to my city," Ángel says. "This is where my family are, I have to do something for them."

'I didn't accept the answer'

In a small village on the northern frontier of Colombia, not far from Cúcuta, you will find another reason why Dr Corredor won't give up on the future he wants.

Here lives a man who once cut a powerful figure on horseback, one you might describe as a "typical Latin American man. He was a farmer and a leader. A big guy like me," says Ángel who himself towers over most people in any room.

When this strong man felt a weakness in his arm, he thought he was just tired. At the local hospital in their remote mountain village, the doctor treated him for flu. When Dr Corredor, already a neurologist, heard what had happened he tried everything in his power to have his uncle moved to a hospital where he could receive the proper care.

But what was done couldn't be undone. The stroke left the powerful farmer bedridden with hemiplegia, dysarthria, epilepsy and an overwhelming sadness. It left Dr Corredor even more deeply convinced of the need to do something, to work continuously against the suffering of his family and his uncle. His response was the same as it had been in that ER many years ago: "I didn't accept the answer."

A flame in the soul

In October 2024, at the World Stroke Congress in Abu Dhabi, Dr Corredor witnessed something extraordinary. Others saw it too and no one would forget it.

As Angels project lead Jan van der Merwe tells it, he had run into Dr Chrissi Tunkle, a German neurologist who needed advice concerning her efforts to support the stroke community in Nepal. Jan, who had just been talking to Claudio Jiménez, knew just the man. At the Angels exhibition booth, he introduced Chrissi to Claudio and his colleague, Ángel Corredor, and then watched the magic of the Angels community unfold.

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What you need is leadership and passion. In medicine, we are taught rules and checklists, but the checklist alone doesn't bring about change.

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Jan recalls: "Claudio explained how he mentored new treating hospitals in circumstances similar to those in Nepal, and encouraged them to create their own communities within their hospital. Chrissi then called the Nepalese delegation over to meet Claudio and learn how to apply these strategies in Nepal.



"Soon an impromptu workshop had formed around a small table next to our booth, where the seven Nepalese doctors, Claudio and Ángel from Colombia, and Chrissi from Germany, were all passionately discussing how to help the Nepalese improve their stroke care."

It was, said Jan, the most vivid example he had seen of the power of the Angels community, this spontaneous gathering of like-minded people with one goal – "to help each other provide the best outcomes for their patients".

It left a deep impression on everyone, including Ángel. Within ten minutes, he says, a symposium had been arranged out of nothing, to talk about how to create a stroke center and a stroke network. "There was no organization or preparation. It wasn't part of the congress; it wasn't on the agenda."

What he has learnt is that it's not always necessary to be on the agenda.

"What you need is leadership and passion. In medicine, we are taught rules and checklists, but the checklist alone doesn't bring about change. With leadership and passion you can make a flame in the soul of somebody so that they wake up and realize, 'I can do this'."



Engineering hope: The Groenkloof story

The stroke service at this Pretoria hospital is the work of a devoted strokologist and his team of converts who do whatever it takes to deliver hope.

THERE are acts of care for which there is no award. Like the diligence of a stroke nurse placing a pillow under a patient's affected arm when she turns them onto their other side. The patience to show a stroke patient's frightened family how to care for their loved one, and then to gently explain it all over again. The kindness of a junior nurse moistening parched lips with ice cubes in the middle of a long night.



Sr Elaine Lubbe celebrates the diamond award with members of her team and Drs Nozipho Magagula (second from left) and Nathale Norval (in orange).

And it is hard to imagine an award that would do justice to three decades of engineering hope.

Thirty years have passed since Dr Wiebren Duim became a neurologist, in the same year a paper appeared in the New England Journal of Medicine that would change stroke care irrevocably. The breakthrough came in a landmark study that would establish thrombolysis as the standard of care for treating ischemic stroke, potentially changing outcomes for millions of stroke patients around the world.

He'd developed an interest in stroke early on, Dr Duim says, and he was an early believer in the impact of stroke unit care and early rehabilitation. The advent of thrombolysis for acute ischemic stroke made him a believer in miracles too.

"It sends a shiver down the spine," he says, describing the effect of successful recanalization.

"In casualty if you see someone with acute stroke they will look at you with a blank face. No movement; no expression besides fear."

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It's like a miracle,
I cannot explain it, **but**
if you see it, you are
a convert.

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But if you do the right thing and treat them with thrombolysis in under four-and-a-half hours (because that is all the time you have to change the outcome of a disaster), then you won't believe your eyes.

"While you are still writing your notes, doing the paperwork, arranging for a ward, you will notice a movement. And two days later, you will see that patient walk out of the hospital. It's like a miracle, I cannot explain it, but if you see it, you are a convert."

And that has been Dr Duim's intention all along – to turn you into a convert.

"Once I have a convert," he continues, "they become a stroke champion. Then, no matter what time of the day or night, no matter the circumstances, come rain or shine, they will do what is necessary."

And he really does mean "do", because not every patient is a two-day miracle. For those for whom life will never be the same again, who must travel a long, hard road with no clear destination, hope begins when you "do something".

"You do a thing," Dr Duim explains.

"The physio gets you out of bed and makes you stand. She augments your strength with her own, she puts her back into it. And the next time you see the patient they have a smile on their face, because something has happened, there is progress. Yesterday they could not move, but today there is a new shimmer of hope."

Hope builds over time. And when at last the patient is discharged to a life they may not recognize, the work of building hope is transferred to the stroke community. In 30 years Dr Duim has often witnessed how a stroke unleashes the goodwill of a community prepared to make plans, press on, and bear a burden together.

"It brings tears to your eyes," he says.

"We sit together and figure it out"

Life Groenkloof Hospital, formerly The Little Company of Mary, is a private hospital located in Pretoria, South Africa's administrative capital. Dr Duim's clinical home for the past 20 years, it had a reputation for stroke care excellence long before they won their first Angel Award in 2024. Once a year on World Stroke Day, the hospital is bathed in green

light as part of the stroke awareness programme run by communications coordinator Karen Landsberg. This campaign highlights the critical roles emergency unit nurses and doctors play in the emergency management of persons affected by strokes. For emergency unit manager Sr Elaine Lubbe, this is a moment when pride feels like a lump in your throat.

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Teamwork is more than a catchphrase, and **each patient's recovery is an ongoing conversation.**

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Life Groenkloof Hospital is where you have the honor of meeting some of Dr Duim's converts – among them speech therapist Megan Barnes, and Sr Lydia Lwanga, unit manager for the acute neurology ward, St Francis, who together with Sr Elaine drives the quality monitoring process that has seen the hospital go from gold to diamond status in under a year.

The neuro ward is located on the same floor as the gym where stroke



Sr Lydia Lwanga and speech therapist Megan Barnes at Angels Day.

patients undergo three hours of therapy per day, Megan says. "Then the nurses repeat what they have seen us do."

Teamwork is more than a catchphrase, and each patient's recovery is an ongoing conversation. "We sit together and figure it out," Megan says, adding that they speak "a hundred times a day".

Megan has been on Dr Duim's team from the start, preventing complications and teaching stroke survivors how to have the best life they can. Family meetings are part of the protocol, and hope is served with a side of reality. Rehab is hard.

Educating families reduces readmission rates, and the Life Groenkloof Hospital team do everything possible to prepare patients' families for what is almost inevitably a gruelling time ahead. When relatives are scarce, as when the adult children of elderly patients are living abroad, it may fall to the team gently but firmly pry someone away from their independence.

Megan says: "We are also there when big life decisions are made." It isn't easy telling someone they cannot go home.

Sr Elaine arrived at Life Groenkloof Hospital 18 years ago, and recalls being handed a booklet and being told that "this was Dr Duim's process". "His passion has rubbed off on all of us," she says. Her own passion is ignited by having a positive impact on other lives, inspiring her younger colleagues and "seeing a patient wave goodbye with the arm that was affected by stroke".

In 2023, she and Sr Lydia decided it was time for the stroke team at Life Groenkloof Hospital to be recognized for their work. "We wanted to be on the map," she says. Submitting their patient data on RES-Q gave them instant feedback on what could be improved and



a visit to their colleagues at Life Eugene Marais Hospital (already an award winner) helped get them past the post.

All Life Healthcare acute hospitals enrolled in the Stroke Restore programme are stroke-ready hospitals and have implemented the integrated stroke pathway. They all provide critical interventions like intravenous thrombolysis and offer immediate access to neuro-rehabilitative services. Eleven Life hospitals have so far won WSO Angels Awards, including 12 diamond awards, two of which would stand behind Life Groenkloof Hospital's name by the end of 2024.

At the end of quarter one, their first gold award had confirmed that they were already very good. In quarter two a platinum award signalled they had gotten even better. Becoming a diamond hospital solidified their position among the world's top stroke-treating hospitals. It doesn't get any better than that.

"We nurse differently"

Sr Lydia Lwanga thought she had found her niche in obstetrics until she came to the St Francis neuro unit in 2013 and discovered stroke nursing. "It blew my mind," she says.

She loves to see patients go from helpless to "home and healed", and keeping in mind that they have a family waiting for them to come home, feeds her empathy. "You treat them as if they're your mother, your father, your sister, your brother," she says. "Everyone gives their best."

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We all share a vision," Megan says. "We all know what to do. And **doing it with patience and love**, is good for morale.

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"We treat every patient as we would want someone in our family to be treated," Sr Elaine concurs. Emergency nurses typically thrive on adrenalin, but Elaine says they have "a softer touch". This compassionate approach to caring for their vulnerable patients seems

intuitive with everyone on the team. "It's in the drinking water," Sr Elaine quips.

Stroke nursing is a unique discipline, requiring vast depths of empathy combined with a steely resolve. This is no typical ward where you will find the patients neatly tucked in, and the bedding pristine.

"We nurse differently," Megan says.

On Sr Lydia's ward, they want the patient to feed themselves, to learn to manage without a catheter, to take those hard steps towards their second chance. Sometimes it's necessary to be strict.

"We want them to go have a life after they leave, so they have to adapt themselves to a new level of functioning. The stroke ward does that. It may look like chaos, but you want the chaos, it's about managing the chaos."

Recovery can get messy, like life itself.

"We all share a vision," Megan says. "We all know what to do. And doing it with patience and love, is good for morale. It's why we keep doing it. Seeing our patients' quality of life improve is good for our souls."



From left, speech therapist Megan Barnes, Sr Lydia Lwanga, Unit manager St Francis neuro ward, Siphon Mafale, Unit manager high care, neurologists Dr Wiebren Duim and Dr Chris Guldenpfennig, Sr Elaine Lubbe, occupational therapist Nikki de Beer, neurologist Dr Linette van Niekerk, RehabWorx secretary Drieka Swanepoel, Angels consultant Carla Scholtz, Sr Andronica Phala, Specialised intensive care unit, and physiotherapist Retna Nienaber.

In the right place at the right time

A hospital in East Kalimantan wanted to improve its stroke care, so the universe seated a retired neurologist and a rookie consultant next to each other on a plane...

SUCCESS, they say, is mostly about managing chance. And the key to being successful is being prepared for chance when it occurs.

When Angels consultant Fransisca Elisabet boarded a plane from Jakarta to her hometown Balikpapan in East Kalimantan in March 2024, chance was about to find her. The former general practitioner had only been an Angels consultant for a couple of weeks, and after attending an Angels event in Jakarta, she was going home with a lot to think about.

One thought that may have occurred to her was how lovely it was to be going home. Before joining Angels, Sisca and her husband Wilsen had been kept apart by their professional lives for three years. The new job allowed her to move with their small son from Bandung back to Balikpapan where Wilsen was working as a geologist.

Among the passengers boarding the 7 pm flight from Jakarta was one that strongly resembled the Argentinian soccer legend Lionel Messi – a resemblance so striking that Sisca couldn't help pointing it out to the elderly gentleman in the seat next to her. She realized too late that she had broken the

seal on the invisible boundary between passengers that makes flying economy bearable. Instead of catching up on sleep she would now be fielding questions from a complete stranger about what she did, and why she was going to Balikpapan.

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Dr Hendra Gunawan took in every word. He was surprised to hear of such a program being available outside the major cities. It was, he said, **exactly what Balikpapan needed.**

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By the time the seatbelt signs went off, Sisca had turned on her laptop and was giving a presentation on stroke care improvement to her neighbor, and showing him all the materials that were available on the Angels website. Dr Hendra Gunawan took in every word. He was surprised to hear of such a program being available outside the major cities. It was, he said, exactly what Balikpapan needed.



Outside the stroke unit at Kanujoso Hospital. The stroke unit head Ns. Harumi is third from left. Third from right is Ns. Elis from the National Brain Center who conducted a workshop for nurses.

Chance had arranged for Sisca to be seated next to a neurologist from Dr Kanujoso Djatiwibowo General Hospital, one of four hospitals in East Kalimantan where she hoped to make an impact. Partly retired, Dr Hendra was no longer working full time at Kanujoso, but his son Dr Athony Gunawan was the hospital's general neurologist and neurointerventionist. "My son will be very interested," he told Sisca. "He is smart, the two of you can work together."

Two hours sped past and as soon as they were in the airport terminal waiting to collect their luggage, Dr Hendra made a video call to his son and handed Sisca the phone.

Love your work

"The video call from my father and Dr Sisca was something unexpected," Dr Anthony Gunawan (34) says. He had in fact been looking for ways to develop stroke services at Kanujoso since joining the hospital in March 2023, after his neurology residency at Hasanuddin University in Makassar and an interventional neurology fellowship at the same university. He had reached out to Angels about training for his hospital, but no date

had been set. Now a newly fledged Angel from his own city was talking to him on his father's phone.

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On my father's desk at home there is a poem titled 'love your work'. He taught us to always love our work, so that we would always work happily.

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Balikpapan was where his father left the footprints that Dr Anthony would later follow. He says, "For as long as I can remember my father has been a neurologist. When I was little, I lived in a house that also served as my father's practice. Every day I watched my father practice as a neurologist with great enthusiasm. Even on holidays we often accompany my father to the hospital after going to church or taking a walk.

"On my father's desk at home there is a poem titled 'love your work'. He taught us to always love our work, so that we would always work happily."

East Kalimantan has the highest stroke incidence in all of Indonesia, and most stroke patients only receive antithrombotic therapy and other supportive therapies, resulting in a very high rate of disability, Dr Anthony says.

"When serving stroke patients in an outpatient clinic, I encountered many patients who suffered from severe disabilities post-stroke. Many of them had been fired from their jobs and had fallen into poverty, or were being shunned by their families because they had become a burden, and faced many other social problems. Seeing this, we neurologists in East Kalimantan are motivated to improve stroke care services."

Dr Anthony's hospital is a government-run facility with quite adequate resources, he says. They have a CT scan, MRI, a cath lab, and a modern stroke unit his father had helped build. But as he would tell Sisca the following day, the stroke code hadn't been implemented, there were knowledge gaps to fill, and to rise to the moment created by stroke prevalence in their province, they needed help.

The right place at the right time

Chance can present opportunities one wouldn't have otherwise encountered, such as being in the right place at the right time and meeting the right person. But seizing those opportunities and turning them into success takes discipline and action. Sisca reported to Kanujoso Hospital less than 12 hours after she arrived back in Balikpapan. She and Dr Anthony shared a laugh about her chance meeting with his dad, and then they got to work.

Training and simulation were at the top of the agenda but because it would take time for hospital bureaucracy to greenlight such an intervention, Sisca arranged for a team lead by Dr Anthony to attend a two-day Angels Day event in June – "so they'd have a picture in their heads of what to expect".

The workshop and simulation at Kanujoso Hospital took place a month later on July 27 and was received with enthusiasm, plenty of questions and willing



volunteers. It included a nurses' workshop on post-acute care and the FeSS protocol by Ns. Elis Nurhayati Agustina of the National Brain Center in Jakarta whose presentation at Angels Day had caught Dr Anthony's interest.

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Our hope for the future is to **build a more integrated stroke care system** that involves other hospitals around us.

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Three days later Sisca visited Kanujoso again, this time to talk about quality monitoring. She showed them how to use the stroke care quality improvement registry RES-Q, and staff members were identified who would be responsible for entering their patient data.

The next time she followed up, on August 16, there were already 38 patients in the registry some of whom had been treated with thrombolysis. By September 4 there were 84, but the percentage of thrombolized patients treated in under 60 minutes still fell short of the criteria for a WSO Angels gold award. The team at Kanujoso dug deep and by September 30 they had recorded 116 cases. Confirming their award status would be a mere formality.

More than a coincidence

In the nine months that followed Sisca and his father's chance meeting on a flight from Jakarta, a lot has changed at his hospital, Dr Anthony says. "We have been trying to rebuild a comprehensive stroke service, starting from improving the system and the flow of stroke care from the acute phase to the post-acute phase. We have finally built a more efficient stroke code system.

"We have also started building an interventional neurology service system to support mechanical thrombectomy procedures, starting with forming an interventional neurology team, sending four nurses for neurointervention

training, equipping tools and devices for thrombectomy, and drafting standard operating procedures for neurointerventional procedures.

"Our hope for the future is to build a more integrated stroke care system that involves other hospitals around us."

Balikpapan should be proud of having a stroke unit like the one at Kanujoso, Sisca says, noting the absence of ward stratification (based on national insurance membership and the ability to pay) that plagues some sectors of the Indonesian healthcare system. "There's no discrimination based on status."

They should be proud of Dr Anthony, too. "He is still very young, super humble, and everyone talks about how smart he is," Sisca says.

As for his father, chance was not quite done with Sisca and Dr Hendra. On June 1 Sisca was in Surabaya in East Java to attend a national neurology conference. She was having breakfast in her hotel when she noticed a familiar face among the guests. When he recognized her, Dr Hendra sat down at her table and the two of them enjoyed breakfast together.

"He even got me an omelette and said I had to eat more protein, and I fetched him more vegetables and salad," she laughs, recalling these small courtesies between two strangers on a plane whose chance meeting may have been something more than a coincidence.

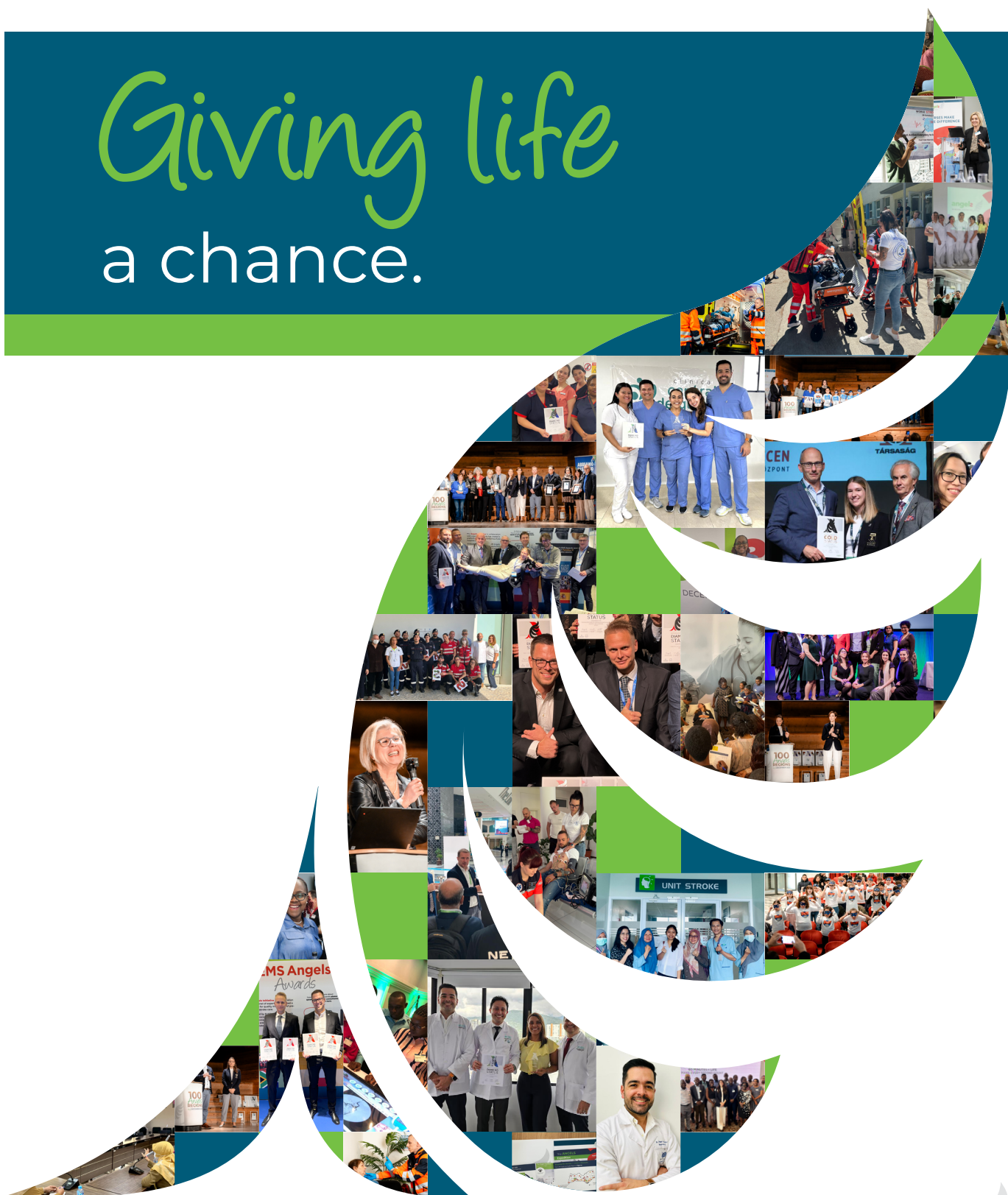


The East Kalimantan team on Angels Day. From left they are Dr Patrick (Kanujoso Hospital), Ns. Junaedi (Pertamina Hospital), Dr Qimi (Pertamina), Sisca, Dr Anthony Gunawan (Kanujoso), Dr Fira (Pertamina), Ns. Dyah (Pertamina), and Ns. Maria (Kanujoso).



A very consequential plane ride. Sisca with Dr Hendra Gunawan.

Giving life a chance.



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