

Hospital helping people who have trouble swallowing

BY TERRI T. JOHNSON, Staff writer

ttjohnso@observer-reporter.com

MONONGAHELA – Swallowing is almost as automatic as breathing, unless a person has suffered a stroke, has Parkinson's disease or neuromuscular problems. Then the simple act of swallowing a sip of water can become almost impossible. The problem is called dysphagia, and almost 15 millions Americans suffer from it.

Diana Brean, speech/language pathologist at Monongahela Valley Hospital, is trained in a new treatment technique called VitalStim.

Swallowing is both a voluntary and involuntary reflex, Brean said. The initial part, when the food or liquid is placed in the mouth and pushed to the top of the throat, is voluntary. Once the item is pushed past the base of the tongue at the back of the mouth, the act becomes involuntary, all the way to when the food or liquid enters the esophagus. It's the involuntary part that is helped by VitalStim's electrode stimulation.

If a patient cannot swallow, one of the few alternatives is placing a tube in the abdomen or severely altering the diet with pureed or liquified foods.

"In nursing home populations, I believe the statistics are 50 to 70 percent have problems swallowing," Brean said.

Once the problem has been identified through barium-swallow testing, the therapy involves placing four electrodes on the patient's neck. The VitalStim unit is about the size of a large cellular telephone and emits a small electrical pulse to stimulate the throat muscles while the patient takes a sip of water or swallows something as simple as ice chips. As the therapy progresses, so does the type and amount of food or liquid used during the electrical stimulation.

The technique is not a miracle cure. Several sessions are necessary.

"It doesn't hurt," Brean said. "But they do feel a grab."

A physician's referral is necessary, and the technique is covered by most major insurance companies.

VitalStim has been on the market for about two years, but was instituted at Mon Valley Hospital six months ago.

Most of the patients receive the treatment on an outpatient basis. Brean travels to the hospital's outpatient clinics, and to local nursing and rehabilitation centers.

"They don't want feeding tubes," she said of the patients. "They want to be more independent and to go out to restaurants."

About 10 patients have benefited from the technique so far, Brean said.

"Once Diana was certified and the equipment was here and she was comfortable, we're now letting the physicians know it's available. We hope to see an increase in volume," said Ruth Sepesky, director of rehabilitation services at the hospital.

The treatment also is available at Washington Hospital, Sepesky said, but by offering it at Mon Valley, patients don't have to travel across Washington County.

"We'll try anything to help the patient lead a normal life," Sepesky said.

Symptoms of dysphagia include coughing during or after swallowing, choking on food or liquid, the sensation of food getting stuck in the throat, pain during swallowing and shortness of breath during feeding.

For information on VitalStim, call Brean at 724-258-6211.