

VitalStim Therapy helps patients eat and smile again

By LAURA PATE

St. Joseph News Press

St. Joseph, MO

January 20, 2005

In early October, dinner for Jean Adams consisted of pureed and liquid foods, such as applesauce. Dysphagia, or impaired swallowing, prevented her from eating a normal meal. Respiratory problems hindered her speech and a weak peripheral motor nerve robbed the multiple sclerosis patient of her ability to smile.

When Pat Wilson, speech therapist at Living Community of St. Joseph, suggested Mrs. Adams try VitalStim Therapy, a practice that involves placing electrical currents on the throat and face, Mrs. Adams worried.

“At first, I was ready to do something to her,” she says about Mrs. Wilson. “I even asked her, ‘Did you try this?’”

After Mrs. Wilson placed the electrical currents on her own neck and turned up the voltage, Mrs. Adams complied.

“If it’s gonna do any good I’d better shut up and accept it,” Mrs. Adams says.

A SPARK AHEAD OF THE REST

The Living Community of St. Joseph began offering VitalStim Therapy three weeks ago, after Mrs. Wilson received training and certification at a VitalStim conference in Kansas City. The Living Community is the only place in St. Joseph where people can receive VitalStim Therapy. It is one of 27 Missouri facilities where people can receive the treatment. Approved by the Food and Drug Administration in 2002, VitalStim Therapy is the only neuromuscular electrical stimulation approved to treat dysphagia. About 15 million Americans have dysphagia, which usually results from strokes, heart attacks and multiple sclerosis.

In her latest treatment, Mrs. Wilson places four electrical currents on Mrs. Adams’ throat.

“Can you feel anything?” Mrs. Wilson asks as she keeps the voltage at a level two.

“No,” Mrs. Adams replies.

As it increases to five, Mrs. Adams says she feels a “pins and needles” sensation, as if the electrodes were “dancing” on her throat. This sensation means the electrodes are touching the sensory nerve, which is responsible for the sense of touch.

Then Mrs. Wilson increases the power more rapidly from five, to seven, to eight and to 10.

“Are you alright?” she asks Mrs. Adams.

Mrs. Adams replies with a winced face.

“There’s discomfort as you go from the sensory nerve to the motor nerve,” Mrs. Wilson explains.

Patients often feel a “grab” on the motor nerve, she says, which is responsible for performing actions such as swallowing.

Then, Mrs. Adams gulps loudly, which means the VitalStim is working — retraining the swallowing muscles. The electrodes had moved from the sensory nerve to the motor nerve.

“It’s like lifting weights,” Mrs. Wilson says. “The next day you are at a higher level.”

MILTON’S STORY

After Milton “Bud” Fraser suffered a stroke, he couldn’t speak and he couldn’t eat. He used his hands to spell words in the air and his dinner arrived via a feeding tube.

“It was difficult,” Mr. Fraser says. “I just didn’t like the stuff they give you through the tube. It wasn’t bad, but it wasn’t regular food.”

His daughter, Sherry Bundy, didn’t know if her father would ever be able to live without his feeding tube. Without the help of VitalStim, it would have taken about six months for him to eat pureed or liquid food.

“He probably wouldn’t have gotten to have Thanksgiving turkey,” Mrs. Bundy says. “He was kind of depressed not being able to move and eat.”

But when Mrs. Wilson suggested VitalStim Therapy, Mr. Fraser, like Mrs. Adams, worried.

“I didn’t know for sure,” he says. “Maybe they could kill me or something.”

They didn’t.

After five one-hour treatments, Mr. Fraser could eat again. He devoured oatmeal, bacon and scrambled eggs for his first meal at the Living Community.

“He ate everything,” Mrs. Bundy says. “I said, ‘Dad, don’t get used to eating this much food because I don’t cook this much at home.’”

While Mr. Fraser enjoyed a hearty first meal, Mrs. Adams requested something lighter: a salad with ranch dressing.

After four one-hour treatments, Mrs. Adams could also smile again.

Her husband, John, says he likes the results.

“He thinks it’s great,” Mrs. Adams says of her newfound ability to smile. “He told me I look 10 years younger.”

Mrs. Wilson says she is optimistic about VitalStim Therapy.

“Isn’t it incredible every time we have a person recovered and swallowing?” Mrs. Wilson asks. “We laugh for joy.”