

Device helping child relearn to swallow

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The Arizona Republic

Mar. 1, 2005 12:00 AM

The happy toddler was the center of attention as she sat in a highchair and took a few small spoonfuls of applesauce and nibbled at a cracker.

Evelyn Meyer, a 2-year-old Goodyear girl, managed to swallow the food, much to the delight of her proud parents and speech therapist.

"Good job!" Evelyn's mother, Laurie, said, praising her child, who took obvious delight in all the fuss.

Swallowing was big progress for a little girl who may never walk or talk because of Rett syndrome, a crippling ailment first described in 1983.

Evelyn has a host of physical challenges, including an inability to use the throat muscles responsible for swallowing food.

But therapists at Phoenix Children's Hospital are attacking that problem with the use of an electrical device that stimulates the muscles, making swallowing improve.

Evelyn is among the first few children being treated at the hospital with VitalStim Therapy, a device that was cleared for use by the Food and Drug Administration only in late 2002.

"We're limited right now with the number of children we're able to see," said Wendy Elliott, the hospital's manager of rehabilitation services. "So we're usually going with the ones who are most severe."

Michael Meyer, Evelyn's father, said the aim of the therapy is to help the girl have a life as normal as possible.

"This is outstanding," Michael said as Evelyn swallowed some applesauce. "What price can you put on her going ahead and eating with the family?"

Michael, 31, a pilot, and his wife, 36, a homemaker, are the parents of two children. Daughter Kendra was born four months ago.

Laurie said things seemed normal with Evelyn until she was 9 months old and her development stalled.

"We knew when she was about a year old that something wasn't right," she said. "She was diagnosed with Rett syndrome at 14 months."

Medical experts describe the syndrome as a neurological disorder that is found almost exclusively in girls.

The origin and cause remain unknown.

It usually goes unspotted until a child is 6 to 18 months old and then begins to regress in development, showing a loss of communication skills and the purposeful use of hands.

Other problems then crop up, including dysphagia, a difficulty in swallowing.

After Evelyn lost the ability to swallow, she was fitted with a feeding tube attached to her stomach above the navel.

In VitalStim Therapy, electrodes are attached to Evelyn's throat muscles, said Pamela Clarke-Levens, a speech therapist at the Phoenix hospital.

The device sends out painless electrical stimulation that contracts the muscles responsible for swallowing.

"Evelyn had actually lost the ability to suck from a bottle," Clarke-Levens said. "Now she can drink from a cup, which is a more advanced skill."

The goal is that with continued therapy, the muscles will be strengthened and "re-educated," thus allowing Evelyn to be able to be nourished without a tube, she said.

For now, Evelyn is limited to soft foods and pudding mixtures, but the hope is that she will gradually be able to handle food with thicker textures.

Michael said pears are Evelyn's favorite food, but it would be great if she could go to a birthday party some day and actually eat cake.

Laurie hopes her special daughter will learn to handle normal family fare.

"Evelyn enjoys eating," she said.

"She definitely wants to eat. Evelyn never gives up."