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Getting a solid meal

By Hope Anderson
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Rick Burrow's mouth is awakening.

For nearly two years, he slurped up his nutrients through a feeding tube. In the last month, he's eaten garlic mashed potatoes, scrambled eggs and even pureed steelhead.

Burrow, who was hurt in a severe car accident, is the first patient at St. John Medical Center to receive VitalStim therapy, a new treatment that awakens the throat and face muscles in accident, stroke and debilitating disease victims.

The therapy, which has been on the market for the last year and a half, retrains the muscles -- and the brain -- to swallow.

"We take swallowing for granted; we don't think about it," said Susan Dixon, a St. John speech and language pathologist and the only person in Cowlitz County trained in VitalStim therapy. "He has to constantly think about what he's doing."

She calls the therapy "the first breakthrough" for people with dysphagia, or a swallowing disorder.

Burrow, a 49-year-old former plumber, was knocked into a five-month coma after a one-vehicle rollover accident in February 2003. After undergoing two brain surgeries, abdominal surgery and hip surgery, he gradually has relearned basic skills and regained movement in his upper body. His wife, Paddy, has given him 24-hour care and instruction with the help of in-home caregivers.

He only has spoken twice in the last two years -- both times saying "no" -- but he communicates in other ways: smiling and shaking in silent laughter, curling his fingers in an OK sign and giving a thumbs up.

But he still hadn't regained the ability to swallow -- until now.

Five days a week for the last month, Burrow's throat has been hooked up with patches -- called electrodes -- that send stimulation to his muscles. The hand-held machine sends small doses of electricity into the muscles, causing a tingling sensation and then muscle contraction.

On Thursday, the inventor of the therapy, Marcy Freed, a speech therapist from Marysville, Wash., observed his treatment at St. John.

Dixon coaxed pureed peaches, taken from a baby food jar and mixed with a thickener, into Burrow's mouth. His tongue peeked out between his lips as pumpkin-orange traces of the mush clung to his beard.

He grabbed a washcloth, wiping it across his face.

"You got some on your nose, pal," Freed said.

The treatment usually lasts about 30 to 40 minutes. The average patient only needs a dozen treatments, but for some, like Burrow, it takes more.

One patient hadn't swallowed in 17 years before trying VitalStim therapy, Freed said.

Dixon plans to try facial stimulation, in addition to the throat stimulation, to help Burrow chew and regain more movement in his tongue.

In a few weeks, just in time for Thanksgiving dinner, he may be eating solid food, she said.

"Food isn't everything, but it's one way to communicate with your family," Paddy said.

Paddy first learned of the treatment a year ago. At that time, no one in Cowlitz County offered the treatment, so she packed up their home in Silver Lake and moved to Longview for a closer commute to Oregon Health & Science University. Dixon recently became trained, saving the family a drive, and becoming the only person between Vancouver and Olympia to offer the treatment.

Next Friday, Rick turns 50. The following night, Paddy expects her husband to pay up on an old promise. The day after his accident almost two years ago, they were scheduled for a prime rib dinner date at the Toutle Diner.

Now, he can finally keep that date.