

New therapy helps patients swallow

■Locally, 40 people were treated in VitalStim's first six months.

By ELIZABETH DAVIES, *Rockford Register Star*
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ROCKFORD -- It didn't seem like a big problem when Clyde Locklin first had trouble swallowing.

The 79-year-old had been working in the yard, tending to the garden. Maybe it was just too much fresh air. His wife, Barbara, chalked it up to the start of a cold.

But the problem worsened overnight.

The Locklins' doctor sent them to SwedishAmerican Hospital and, a day later, Locklin found himself unable to walk, talk or swallow.

Diagnosed with a disorder that essentially shut down his muscles, Locklin spent six weeks in the hospital trying to get back the functions he lost. He first regained his ability to talk, then to walk.

Still, he couldn't swallow.

Attached to a feeding tube -- and unable to eat his beloved mashed potatoes -- Locklin checked into Van Matre HealthSouth Rehabilitation Hospital on Rockford's east side. It was there that he met Elizabeth Schwartz.

A speech pathologist, Schwartz was six months out of a training program that taught her to use a new type of therapy for patients who could not swallow. Called VitalStim, the approach was approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in 2002 as an option for patients who might not regain their ability to eat any other way.

VitalStim is designed to help patients recover more quickly.

Schwartz helped 40 Van Matre patients in her first six months using the technique. The demand for her service increased so much that Van Matre has arranged for another two of her colleagues to be trained as well.

"It's gotten so popular that I don't have enough time in my day to see all those patients," Schwartz said.

In 2005, Van Matre expects to use VitalStim on at least 160 patients in the Rock River Valley who have problems swallowing.

Like an athlete who would need to build up weak muscles after an injury, these patients need to strengthen their throat muscles so they can swallow again.

For many patients, their ability to swallow was lost after a stroke or brain injury. In other cases, such as Locklin's, another type of disorder is the cause.

Using four electrodes on Locklin's neck, Schwartz sent a series of currents to his throat muscles, increasing the intensity over the course of an hour.

"The first sensation of it is a tingling," Schwartz said. "What you're after is called 'The Grab.' You feel like someone's reaching out and grabbing your throat."

That feeling -- perhaps surprising at first -- is the sensation of success. That means those muscles are reacting and working well.

Locklin had a total of 10 therapy sessions with those electrodes. After having seven or eight, he was treated to his first meal in a month and a half: Mashed potatoes and gravy, a salad, sandwich, lemon cake and milk.

Today, Locklin jokes, he's single-handedly boosting the Pepsi stock price. Now free to sip his favorite soda, he's buying Pepsi by the 12-pack.