

## **Dysphagia patients get new treatment**

October 26, 2004

[KAREN McCONKEY](#) 

*Staff Writer*

Lenoir Memorial Hospital has implemented a revolutionary new electronic stimulus therapy that may help many patients overcome dysphagia, a serious swallowing condition.

Each year nearly 60,000 people nationwide die from complications associated with swallowing disorders, often resulting from stroke or neuromuscular disease. A new procedure being used at LMH could change that.

MaryAnn Hymel, a certified speech therapist, told hospital board members Monday that VitaStim, which stimulates vital nerves and muscles essential for swallowing, helps restore lost function in stroke patients or those who have had other muscle or nerve damage from a medical disorder. The non-invasive procedure is used with an electro-stimulus device.

LMH was one of the first hospitals in the region to use the technology. Based on a six-month survey by Hymel, 418 patients she treated suffered from dysphagia, and of those, only 2 percent were showing any improvement using conventional speech therapy.

But those numbers changed substantially once patients began the nerve-muscle stimulus treatment that strengthens a patient's swallow reflex and eventually allows them to go back to soft foods or even a regular diet.

That goes a long way toward patient recovery, Hymel pointed out.

"If a person can't swallow, they get a feeding tube," she said.

A feeding tube can keep a patient alive and nourished, but has many drawbacks, including:

- n Extended hospital stays

- n Increased costs for care (a feeding tube usually costs about \$31,000 per year)

- n Decreased quality of life affecting a patient's emotional and physical wellbeing.

VitaStim isn't a panacea for all patients with a swallowing disorder, Hymel said. Some illnesses, such as Parkinson's or Lou Gehrig's disease, degenerate the muscle or nerve beyond any therapeutic treatment.

Even patients who can't actively participate in physical therapy to improve their ability to swallow benefit from the treatment, Hymel said.

"It is revolutionary," she said.

Karen McConkey can be reached at (252) 527-3191, Ext. 232, or [Karen\\_McConkey@link.freedom.com](mailto:Karen_McConkey@link.freedom.com).