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Innovative therapy available at MDMC

10/25/05

Scott Welton

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SIKESTON — Swallowing is something we tend to take for granted - until we can't do it.

An estimated 15 million Americans suffer from swallowing disorders. Approximately 60,000 people die each year as a result of complications from dysphagia - the medical term for any difficulty or discomfort in swallowing.



Jennifer Steelman, speech-language pathologist for Missouri Delta Medical Center, places electrodes on the neck of Mabel Armstrong of Sikeston.

Mabel Armstrong of Sikeston nearly became a part of both groups following a neck surgery July 23 for collapsed vertebrae, bone spurs and nerve damage. "They had to pull the muscles up in my right shoulder," she recalled. "About six weeks after my surgery I started getting choked, I couldn't swallow what I ate."

On one occasion, she almost choked to death while dining out. "That's when they recommended I get some therapy done on my swallowing," Armstrong said.

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She received a prescription for VitalStim Therapy, a treatment that uses controlled electrical stimulation to strengthen the swallowing muscles in the throat.

The only therapy of its kind approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Missouri Delta Medical Center began offering this new treatment option for those suffering from dysphagia about three months ago.

“There started to be a demand for it from the physicians,” said Lauren Mosley, a speech-language pathologist for MDMC. “It’s become popular - some doctors had been writing prescriptions specifically for that.”

To administer the treatments, Mosley and Jennifer Steelman, who is also a speech-language pathologist at MDMC, were trained and certified in VitalStim Therapy over the summer.

A small, carefully calibrated current is delivered by specially-designed electrodes to stimulate nerves in the throat which control the swallowing muscles.

“While they have the electrodes in place, we have them do different exercises and we also have them eat and drink to practice swallowing,” Mosley said.

Treatments available at MDMC and ReStart before VitalStim was available stimulated the entire throat area. “This therapy allows us to directly target the muscles that are used in swallowing,” she said. “It’s been proven to be very effective and very quick therapy with a minimum of visits and with long-term results.”

“I went for three days a week for about three weeks, then two times a week for about three weeks,” Armstrong said. “The very first day I used the machine, the very next day I could notice a difference in the swelling. I had a knot in there, and my food was getting hung up behind that knot. After the first week I could eat soft foods pretty good - I still couldn’t eat meat very good.”

Anderson said after about three weeks of the therapy she could eat about anything.

“It’s going great now - that machine is just wonderful,” she said. “I’m just thrilled to death - without that machine and Jennifer, I wouldn’t have made it. I think I would recommend it to anybody. It sure helped me and took care of mine.”

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Mosley said the treatment isn't for everybody. "You do have to have a doctor's order for it," she noted.

For those who are able to get a prescription for it, however, VitalStim can provide a significant cost savings as compared with traditional treatments in addition to being a non-invasive, painless treatment.

"Most people that we working with have had a stroke or laryngeal cancer," Mosley said.

Other causes of dysphagia include traumatic brain injury, cerebral palsy, mouth and throat cancer, Parkinson's disease, Lou Gehrig's disease and several other degenerative and muscular conditions.

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