

Diagnosis: Hard to swallow

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HOPEDALE — Rodney Novack reached for the red plastic cup and carefully brought it to his lips. He took a sip of water, tucked his chin and, with a smile of pride, swallowed.

It's an action that Novack, 65, performed all his life without a single thought. But his ability to swallow - the ability to drink, to eat, to simply clear his throat - ebbed away last fall after aggressive treatment for vocal fold cancer and an accompanying stroke.

"I couldn't do that before," the retired carpenter said. "She just started to let me drink again."

"She" is Melissa Day, a speech pathologist for the Visiting Nurse Association of the Greater Milford-Northbridge Area. Since December, Day has visited Rodney twice a week, placed four electrodes on his throat and stimulated his nerves with a series of low-wattage electrical shocks, a process known as VitalStim therapy.

VitalStim is a relatively new therapy, little-known outside of rehabilitation settings. The placement of the electrodes and accompanying shocks teaches slackened muscles to move properly, allowing patients who previously relied only on feeding tubes to eat solid food again. Last fall, the Milford VNA became the only home care agency in the state to provide it to patients.

"I saw it at a conference and said 'ooh,'" Day said. "Up until now in the field of speech, there really wasn't a lot we could do for these patients. The treatments we had were invasive and there were patients we just couldn't help. This is career-altering in the field of speech pathology."

Electronic stimulation isn't new in medicine - physical therapists have been using it for decades. Day's VitalStim pack is about the size of a cell phone and provides a jolt that's so small, it's measured in milliamps.

"For me, when I had it on, it felt just like someone was pulling," Day said. "What's fascinating to me is the learning that happens in the brain for this ... it teaches, and the brain learns. The muscles re-learn what they're supposed to do, and it happens really fast."

Marla Meehan, rehabilitation services manager for the Milford VNA, said the agency has seen a number of success stories since VitalStim was added. Both Day and her fellow speech pathologist, April Izzi, are certified in the treatment.

"By bringing this to patients at home, we're allowing them to have food in their own environment," Meehan said. "That's not a small thing. They can eat the food as it's actually prepared at home, rather than in an institutional setting."

The treatment arrived just in time for Novack. His wife, Judy, had just finished treatment for lung cancer last spring when he noticed a growing mass inside his neck. The diagnosis of vocal flap cancer required aggressive radiation and chemotherapy, which finally ended in October. His weakened state brought on a stroke in November, which took away his remaining ability to swallow.

Since Novack had lost most of the sensation in his throat, he and his caregivers did not realize there was an issue at first. When he ate or drank, he aspirated his food and drink, drawing them into his lungs. He developed aspiration pneumonia as a result.

"More people die of aspiration pneumonia than AIDS, and very few people are aware of it," Day said.

About 15 million Americans suffer from dysphagia, a condition that causes discomfort or difficulty swallowing. Dysphagia is common in patients with neurological disorders like Parkinson's disease, throat or neck cancers or who have had strokes.

According to the Agency for Health Care Policy and Research, over 60,000 Americans die annually from complications associated with dysphagia, most commonly aspiration pneumonia.

"When we first started, he was the most ridiculously difficult patient there is - when he aspirated, it was a silent aspiration. He didn't have the ability to cough it up," Day said. "And his speech was very sloshy."

When Day entered Novack's life in December, he carried only a spare 110 pounds on his lanky frame, down from a high of 140 in healthier times. With a mischievous smile, Novack dashed into another room and returned with a scale, which he set in the middle of the living room floor.

Verdict: 122 pounds.

"I'm over 120," he said proudly.

"It's the carpet," Judy Novack said dryly. "You're 120 in the kitchen."

While Novack still receives nutrition from the tube implanted in his stomach, he's now able to eat small meals twice a day, with liquid.

"I'm eating now," Novack said, listing off his favorites from his allowed list. "French toast. Mac and cheese. Ohhh, mac and cheese," he said with a sigh.

"And mashed potatoes, but I don't like mashed potatoes. I want sweet potatoes. The flavor! I want flavor."

"I'm just dying to see the day when he can bite into a sandwich," his wife said.

The change in Novack's personality has also been amazing, Day said. When she first started visiting the house, he was somewhat depressed and withdrawn, both because of the food issue and his difficulties communicating after the stroke. The success in swallowing and his determination to restore his speech has given him a new outlook.

"You never really realize food - it's your whole life," Day said. "Your whole life revolves around it one way or another. When you take it away, it affects you emotionally and socially. Your family doesn't want to eat in front of you. You can't go to a restaurant. You're very isolated."

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