



spotlight on health

Innovative Therapy Gives New Hope To Stroke Survivors Living With Pain

(NAPS)—Though in his mid-forties, Arthur Cruz sometimes wished he were dead. A stroke had left him with such intense muscle spasms and pain in his legs and back that he could barely walk without assistance.

“I couldn’t do (anything),” said Cruz. “I would do nothing at home. We’d go to the store and I would do nothing. There’d be parties for the family and I would do nothing, and most of the time I’d sit down (just) watching, watching.”

For several years, Cruz underwent painful physical therapy and tried various medications. None of the treatments helped. The muscles in his arms and legs began to tighten and ‘freeze’ into uncomfortable, painful positions.

That’s when a doctor started Cruz on Intrathecal Baclofen (ITB) Therapy. Today Cruz can walk up a flight of stairs, cook, feed the dog, and even clean the house, all without pain.

ITB Therapy involves surgically implanting a small disc-shaped pump in the abdominal wall. Once inside the body, the pump release controlled doses of the drug baclofen through a catheter into the fluid surrounding the spinal cord. The drug relaxes the muscles and prevents them from tightening.

According to the National Stroke Association, stroke is the nation’s third leading cause of death. And it’s the number one cause of adult disability in the United States. Of the more than

Stroke Symptoms

Sudden numbness or weakness of face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body

Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding

Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes

Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination

Sudden severe headache with no known cause

provided by National Stroke Association



four million stroke survivors in America, nearly two-thirds have moderate to severe disabilities.

Spasticity, a condition in which tight, stiff muscles and joints make movement of the arms or legs difficult or uncontrollable, can be very painful for stroke survivors and can impede the ability to perform simple everyday tasks, such as bathing, dressing or walking.

Initial treatment for spasticity usually includes a combination of physical exercises and oral medications. Other therapies may include nerve-blocking injections of Botox or Phenol, or ITB Therapy. As a last result, some patients may undergo orthopedic surgery.

New research has shown significant improvement in the mobility of stroke survivors treated with ITB Therapy. A recent study at the University of Alabama, Birmingham found that patients treated with ITB Therapy

significantly reduced muscle tightness and increased their ability to use their arms and legs.

“(ITB Therapy) is the best thing to have happened to me,” said Dr. Gerard Francisco of the Institute for Rehabilitation Research in Houston. “I’m a rehabilitation specialist and many times we only try to reduce the disabilities and impairments of our patients, but now we can be more proactive. This therapy has allowed (patients) to respond better to their physical or occupational therapy.”

The Food and Drug Administration approved ITB Therapy in 1996 as a treatment option for stroke survivors, but its use by stroke patients has not been widespread. According to experts, the therapy remains effective after many years and side effects are minimal. Stroke survivors experiencing muscle tightness or spasms may be candidates for the device. Those interested should consult their doctors.

Arthur Cruz credits ITB Therapy with restoring his quality of life. “The pump helped me hang in there.”

The National Stroke Association is an independent, national nonprofit organization devoting 100 percent of its resources to stroke—including prevention, treatment, rehabilitation and support for stroke survivors and their families. For more information, call 1-800-STROKES (1-800-787-6537) or visit www.stroke.org.