



Spinal Cord Stimulation Relieves Cancer Pain

Last summer, the National Institutes of Health convened a State of the Science conference on cancer pain, depression and fatigue. The panel of experts found that these three symptoms are often under-treated in cancer patients, despite the existence of effective strategies to manage them.

"Sometimes the pain is worse than the disease," reported Nolan Tzou, MD, Director of Huntington's Center for Pain Treatment.

For Angela Orofino, effective management of her cancer-related pain was a major quality of life issue. First diagnosed with breast cancer in 1983, Mrs. Orofino remained cancer-free for six years before her disease recurred in 1989. Effective treatment provided her with a ten-year remission, but in 1999 her cancer metastasized to the rib bone, causing severe pain.

An Assistant Professor at St. Joseph's College in Patchogue, Mrs. Orofino found that narcotic pain relievers interfered with her ability to work.

"The medication was affecting my cognition and making me drowsy," she explained. "The pain was so terrible that I couldn't function, but I couldn't function on the medication, either."

Recognizing that her ability to continue working was a priority for Mrs. Orofino, Dr. Tzou recommended a pain management tool that is not often used in cancer patients. "He introduced me to the possibility of a spinal cord stimulator," Mrs. Orofino said. "He showed my husband and me a video about the device and we liked what we saw."

Dr. Tzou described the device as being similar to a cardiac pacemaker. "It involves the placement of wires along the spinal canal," Dr. Tzou described. "The wires are powered by a small battery to deliver electrical impulses that confuse the nerves, thereby relieving pain."

The battery is surgically implanted under the skin in the patient's buttocks or abdomen. Using a remote

control, the patient can regulate the settings in order to achieve maximum pain control. Both the intensity of the stimulation and the area of coverage can be adjusted.

"I truly have complete control over the operation of the stimulator," Mrs. Orofino confirmed. Instead of pain, spinal cord stimulation creates a tingling sensation. "Probes are placed strategically at a certain level in the spine to correlate to the area where pain occurs," said Dr. Tzou. "Stimulation of the nerves causes tingling, confusing the nerves and blocking the pain sensation,"

Implantation of the device took place in Huntington Hospital's Operating Room. Mrs. Orofino continues to see Dr. Tzou on a regular basis to monitor the device.

While spinal cord stimulation is more commonly used in patients with chronic leg and back pain, Dr. Tzou believed that this device would enable Mrs. Orofino to maintain her professional and personal quality of life.

"When patients can't tolerate pain medication, then other techniques such as nerve blocks and devices like this are indicated," he said.

Mrs. Orofino describes spinal cord stimulation as "the best gift I have been given in my life." Since it was implanted, she has been able to swim, garden, and walk again, all without debilitating pain. Most importantly, it has allowed her to continue teaching college students.

"I love my profession," Mrs. Orofino stated. "Being with young people keeps me energized and stimulates my mind. It's something I would never want to have to give up."

Thanks to Dr. Tzou and spinal cord stimulation, she doesn't have to. For additional information on the variety of techniques available to treat chronic and cancer pain, contact the Center for Pain Management at (631) 629-4770.