

Stem cell use - miracle or myth?

Local residents speak out on how adult stem cell therapy changed their lives

By BRENDA HAWKINS

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From robotic limbs to plastic joints, some local residents describe today's rapid-fire breakthroughs in adult stem cell therapy as nothing short of a miracle.

Unlike the more controversial embryonic stem cell therapy, adult stem cells are taken from the patient's own blood, expanded in culture and then reintroduced into the patient to treat a number of conditions including congestive heart failure, peripheral artery disease, coronary artery disease, kidney disease, pulmonary disease, early senile dementia and more.

"We've already made significant progress in treating diseases that were thought to be untreatable," says Dr. Zannos Grekos, a cardiologist and lead researcher at Regenocyte Therapeutic in Bonita Springs. "The results of our experience with adult stem cell therapy show the potential for use in every aspect of human pathology. This will radically change the way that physicians approach and treat patients in the future."

But not all doctors are as optimistic as Grekos.

According to Dr. Mark Russo, a nephrologist and chairman of medicine at Naples Community Hospital, the jury is still out.

"I welcome new therapies and embrace them, so long as they're backed by clinical trials that compare the outcome of a new therapy or drug with that of the current ones," he says. "I'm not at a point where I would recommend adult stem cell therapy, but there's not enough information for me to tell someone, 'Don't do it.'"

Grekos says Regenocyte has achieved improvement – measurable by standard cardiopulmonary tests – in 100 percent of its patients and has published that body of data in several places.

"It's not without promise, but more study and research needs to be done; it's mostly anecdotal evidence now," continued Dr. Russo. "We need doctors like Dr. Grekos who are willing to take the chance and risk their reputation in the face of criticism. I applaud his pursuit of progress."

The Citizen talked to four local residents or their loved ones, regarding their experience with adult stem cell therapy.

Howard Lindeman, East Naples

Howard Lindeman's massive heart attack wasn't entirely unexpected; after all, his father and grandfather both died of coronaries. But, at age 39, he says it was still a shock to wake up in the hospital, forced to face a life of medications, multiple surgeries, loss of vitality and annoying limitations on his previous globetrotting lifestyle.

Today, at age 57, Lindeman found it increasingly difficult to continue his work as an internationally-known sound engineer.

"He was feeling pretty bad," says his partner Ginni Richards. "He had to travel for a living and he tired so

easily, it was hard to walk. He had to do a lot of nitro.”

While attempting to replace a failed stint, doctors encountered a solid blockage in his heart that couldn't even be chipped away. That's when he met the doctor who told him about the stem cell option. In April last year, Lindeman decided to give it a try.

The procedure calls for drawing about eight ounces of blood, which, due to American restrictions, has to be sent to Israel to culture for stem cells, and then back to a hospital in either the Dominican Republic or on Grand Bahama, where the cells are then infused back into the patient's body.

“It's a shame politics get in the way of this,” says Richards. “It's your own stem cells from your own blood; it's not embryonics. It should be available and affordable for everyone who needs it.”

Instead, the couple took a brief trip to Santiago, where Richards said the operation took place in a brand new hospital.

“It's not a ‘Get it done and get up and run around thing’” she says. “But, almost immediately, he was nothing like before. And, because of his age, the outlook is so much better for not having his chest broken open.”

In fact, just five days after the procedure, Lindeman was in New York, in charge of the sound system for Pope Benedict's visit to Yankee Stadium.

“It was a major stress job, but he felt up to it,” Richards says. “Stem cell therapy opens so many doors. The body is designed to heal itself; this makes so much sense.”

Ed. Note: Lindeman was heading up sound for the Roberta Flack benefit concert in Australia at the time of this interview.

Barbara McKean, Marco Island

“I can't really describe it, but it was a feeling of general well-being. Right away, I noticed I didn't need as much oxygen,” says Barbara McKean, describing how she felt just one day after her stem cell procedure in November. “Two weeks before Christmas, I had a feeling; somehow I just knew I didn't need oxygen anymore.”

Sure enough, an oximeter registered 97 – a stunning improvement for someone who needed three to four liters of oxygen per day, just six weeks prior.

McKean, 57, developed a “mild” case of pulmonary emphysema (COPD) in her 40s. The condition worsened quickly, resulting in multiple bouts of pneumonia and many days of hospitalization.

“I wanted to do things, like dust and take care of my house, but I couldn't even walk the dogs. My oxygen would get so low, it was frightening,” she says. “It would take days for my oxygen to get back up.”

Today, McKean walks blocks at a time and if her oxygen saturation dips, she can recover just by sitting down for a few minutes.

She recalls the fascination of watching a TV monitor as doctors threaded a catheter through a vein in her groin, up to her heart and then to top of her lung.

“You could see the whole thing. First, they put in some dye to make sure it was in the right place, then they ran in some saline to get rid of the dye and then they pumped in some of my stem cells,” McKean says. “Then they put it in the middle of the lung and again at the bottom. And then they did the whole thing on my other lung. It was amazing.”

McKean says coming up with more than \$55,000 to pay for the treatment, in addition to airfare, was a

challenge well worth the effort, despite objections of some physicians, one of whom called the idea "hocus pocus."

"This was a chance to change my life. A lot of people contributed to this beautiful life and there's a lot of gratitude," she says, thanking friends and neighbors for their fundraising efforts. "They say you get the best result between three and six months. If there are even more good things coming, I'll be dancing."

Pete Holler, Naples

Pete Holler's heart problems became apparent after suffering a heart attack in 1995. Since then, he's run the gamut of not-so-quick fixes, including having a quadruple bypass and getting a defibrillator pacemaker.

He says nothing really worked.

After a stress test last October, doctors told him his ejection fraction – how much blood the heart pumps out of the main chamber with each heartbeat – wasn't critically low, but that it would get worse.

With half his heart "dead," Holler, 79, opted for stem cell therapy.

"I've felt wonderful ever since," he says. "They repeated the tests they did before the procedure, after about three months, and my heart was fully recovered.

"You could see it (heart) beating on the echocardiogram," he says. "I'm living proof that stem cell therapy works."

Andrew Anderson, North Naples

Three different doctors told Andrew "Drew" Anderson that he was on the best medicine available; there was nothing more they could do for him, short of getting a new heart. But at 79, he was too old for a transplant.

Anderson has a long history of heart problems, including open heart surgery at age 48, followed by for congestive heart failure, two more open heart surgeries and a triple bypass. By the spring of 2008, his outlook was bleak.

"I couldn't speak two words or get out of a chair without being short of breath," he says. "My ejection fraction was about 12 and a half; it should be around 65 percent. I didn't think I'd live too much longer."

Then he heard about adult stem cell therapy. Within a month, Anderson says he felt much better than he had in years; three months after the procedure, Anderson's echocardiogram showed his EF was up to 33 percent.

"My quality of life is so much better," he says. "It's much better than a transplant because you don't have to deal with rejection drugs. It's my pleasure to help anyone who might need this treatment, because I don't know if I'd be here if someone hadn't told me about it."

Unlike most other patients, Anderson plans to undergo a second round of stem cell therapy this week.

"If it does as much as the first time, I'll be very pleased. I'm looking forward to it," he said. "I want to get up around the 50 percent mark, so I can go to England and Ireland and visit my family."

Dr. Grekos will present an educational seminar about adult stem cells at 1 p.m., Monday, Mar. 9, at the Collier Regional Library Headquarters, 2385 Orange Blossom Rd. The program is free and open to the public.