



## Stem cell treatment gives Naples man another chance

**A Southwest Florida doctor is the U.S. cardiology director for the company pioneering the cutting-edge therapy in Bangkok**

By LIZ FREEMAN

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Mel Forbis was running out of time.

He would live, perhaps, another seven or eight months. Congestive heart failure has no sympathy.

Then one evening his son saw a program on The Discovery Channel about adult stem cells, from one's own blood, being cultivated and injected into the heart to grow new muscle and improve heart function.

Because research on the potentials of adult stem cell therapy is in its infancy in the United States, the 72-year-old Forbis checked into Bangkok Heart Hospital in May where he underwent the procedure.

"I feel 100 percent better," Forbis, a retired businessman in Naples, said. "I can walk around and do a lot of things without getting out of breath. Of course, there's a lot of skeptics in the medical field."

For the skeptics, Forbis will be attending a seminar Wednesday about adult stem cell therapy for heart failure patients sponsored by Dr. Zannos Grekos, a cardiologist in Southwest Florida who has become an advocate of the procedure.

The "Regenocyte Therapy" seminar is free to the public and will be held at 11:30 a.m. at the Hyatt Regency Coconut Pointe Resort & Spa in Estero. Seating is limited and anyone interested in attending needs to call 1-866-216-5710 to reserve a seat. The Hyatt is located at 5001 Coconut Road.

"If you get a chance, go to the seminar and find out about it," Forbis said of his advice to others with congestive heart failure, even though he is not a patient of Grekos. "I've just had such great success. It's a lifesaver."

Grekos has become the U.S. cardiology director for Theravita, an international biotechnology company in Bangkok that has pioneered adult stem cell therapy. He will perform medical screenings of Americans wanting to have the procedure done, said Sara Billings, Grekos' clinical coordinator at his new Regenocyte therapy center in Bonita Springs.

"People are surfing the Net," she said, referring to how congestive heart failure patients are researching treatment alternatives when they've exhausted what's available in the United States, namely heart surgery and defibrillators.

The stem cell therapy is expensive, running \$30,000 to \$40,000, and must be paid for out of pocket since it is experimental in the United States and not covered by insurance. The price tag includes travel, hotel stays and the procedure, she said.

The treatment entails a blood draw, which is then sent by courier to a laboratory in Israel where the stem cells are cultivated to multiply millions of times over. The cultivated stem cells are then sent back to the hospital for injecting into the patient's heart muscle.

Along with pre-screening, Grekos will also "optimize" his patients' health as much as possible before they go to Bangkok. That means adjusting medications and defibrillators and whatever else is necessary. He also will do follow-up care and monitoring.

He's made the trip to Bangkok and has seen remarkable improvements in the handful of patients he's known to have had the stem cell therapy.

"You can see it on their echocardiograms," he said, adding that other cardiologists are seeing the same results. "It's hard to argue (over it) with patients who are doing so well."

Forbis underwent the procedure at Bangkok Heart hospital in early May. He was in Bangkok a month and his therapy entailed 36 injections. Thirty of the injections were in the left and weaker side of his heart; the six other injections were in the right side. The Bangkok hospital was impressive, he said.

"It is brand new," Forbis said. "You wouldn't believe it. It is so clean and the physicians there are fantastic."

Before he went to Bangkok, his ejection fraction — a measurement of blood pumping out of the heart — was 19, way below 55, which is considered normal.

"Since I've been back, seven weeks ago it was 34, so it's gone up 90 percent," Forbis said.

Forbis knew he was taking a chance because the Bangkok doctors could not tell him what results he could hope for afterward. And he recognizes U.S. research is years away from making inroads toward potential Food and Drug Administration approval and the politics involved.

"If this works as well as they say it will, what will happen to the pharmaceutical market?" he asked.

Billings, with Grekos' practice, said she's surprised more people are not clamoring for stem cell therapy, given how prevalent the disease is in the United States. Billings cared for congestive heart failure patients for years at NCH Downtown Naples Hospital

"Heart failure is a national epidemic," she said. "Fifty percent of people diagnosed with heart failure will die within five years of diagnosis."

For more information, go to the Web site, [www.theravitae.com](http://www.theravitae.com).

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