

Pain killers

Cutting edge pain procedures offer relief without pills

By **Tom Polansek**
STAFF WRITER

Four years ago, chronic back pain prevented Matt Pullman from sharing bath time with his two young children.

He found that bending over the tub only increased the piercing discomfort he was growing accustomed to after a car accident.

To ease the pain, he took several different prescription medications and saw his doctor for treatment practically every month. The solutions were short-term but they were the best Pullman could find at the time.

That all changed after the South Elgin resident underwent a revolutionary, minimally-invasive procedure called radiofrequency lesioning. In the treatment, a doctor injects a heated needle just under the skin's surface to numb the nerve responsible for causing a patient's pain.

"I've been able to play with my kids a lot more this summer," Pullman said recently.

New pain management

Radiofrequency lesioning, sometimes called "RF" by physicians, is just one in a class of cutting edge, non-invasive procedures that doctors are now using to treat chronic pain problems ranging from arthritis to migraines. Pain specialists say the procedures are less risky than traditional surgery options and offer patients longer term relief than medications or other types of treatment.

Dr. John Prunskis, co-director of the Illinois Pain Treatment Institute in Elgin, performed Pullman's RF and stressed that it does not guarantee a permanent fix. However, he said it offers patients a way to manage their pain without constant visits to the doctor's office or high dosages of medications.

Pullman was able to return home the day of his procedure and said he felt serious relief within the next three weeks. His story, Prunskis said, is an example of how RF and similar new procedures have given new hope to people in pain.

"Things that years ago would always be treated with a scalpel or back surgery or wouldn't be treated at all because we didn't know how to can now be treated with a small needle and go home the same day," Prunskis said. "It's exciting."

Besides keeping him from interacting with his children, Pullman's back pain caused problems in his job in the U.S. Army Reserves. He struggled to get permission from authorities to sit out of basic



training exercises, including two-mile runs, sit-ups and push-ups, all of which he said aggravated his condition.

He felt some of his fellow reservists also looked down on him for not keeping up with the pack.

"With a back injury, it's not like you're in a cast," he said. "It's harder for people to accept that it's a legitimate situation and you're not milking it."

A real issue

Indeed, some view the entire field of pain management, which can include massage and chiropractic care, as a kind of sham. But Dr. Kathryn Padgett, director and founder of the American Academy of Pain Management, said specialists were treating real problems that debilitate thousands of Americans.

She said she started the academy in 1998 because there was not a central body that offered education and certification for clinicians focusing on pain management. Today, the group counts nearly 6,000 members.

"The field is growing and maturing," Padgett said. "I think more and more people are becoming aware of the need for pain management."

Vertebroplasty is another new treatment gaining popularity among pain doctors for treatment of back fractures caused by osteoporosis. In the procedure, a doctor injects a bit of medical cement into a patient's vertebrae to reinforce the back bones.

The new procedures do not come without risk, though. For RF, potential problems include bleeding, infection or allergic reaction to the local anesthetic used during the procedure. In rare cases, nerve damage may also occur, which could lead to persistent symptoms of numbness, burning, or weakness.

The Mayo Clinic warns some patients that they may put themselves in danger of further injury by trying vertebroplasty. Researchers believe it may be best suited only for fractures less than six months old.

"Those with soft or porous bones may be at risk for broken rib bones as a result of vertebroplasty, because the procedure requires the patient to lie facedown for an hour or more," according to MayoClinic.org.

Pullman said he felt soreness after undergoing RF but that it soon faded. Nearly nine months after his procedure, he is now feeling some of his chronic pain return. He said he does not regret undergoing the treatment.

"It's not a permanent solution," Pullman said, "but it's a more manageable one."

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American Academy of Pain Management:

- www.aapainmanage.org /

Illinois Pain Treatment Institute:

- www.illinoispain.com

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