

HEALTHY LIVING



Getting to the heart of bladder matters

BY BILL CORNWELL
bcornwell@floridaweekly.com

It is not a life-threatening condition, and those who suffer from it know that the mere mention of it can occasion snickers and jokes from unfeeling acquaintances.

But anyone who has suffered from the embarrassment and inconvenience wrought by an overactive bladder knows that the ailment can be debilitating. And there's nothing the least bit funny or amusing about that.

"I've had patients who become housebound as a result of incontinence," says Dr. Charlene Okomski, a board-certified physician who specializes in obstetrics and gynecology and practices in Punta Gorda. "They are afraid to leave their homes, fearful that they will have an 'accident' in public. Often, patients with incontinence know where bathrooms are located in their immediate area. They never want to be too far away from one. This constant worry and concern can be psychologically devastating. It can bring about a significant degree of depression."

It is estimated that 34 million Americans suffer from overactive bladder, and the number of sufferers in Charlotte County alone is believed to be about 20,000, according to Florida Health Care News. Roughly 16 percent of men and 18 percent of women in the county are believed to be afflicted with overactive bladder.

There is welcome news for sufferers, and it comes in the form of a minimally invasive surgical treatment called InterStim Therapy, which involves the implantation of a neurostimulator that emits pulses, which go to the nerve controlling the bladder. The implant, which is about the size of a heart pacemaker and inserted in the buttock, sends electrical signals to the nerve, which is located in the tailbone and regulates urinary function. The device is sometimes referred to by laymen as a "bladder pacemaker."

The procedure is successful in alleviating overactive bladder symptoms in about 80 percent of the patients who receive it.

"The procedure is used to treat patients who have urge or frequency incontinence," says Dr. Okomski. "This can result from something like a prostate problem, but often we simply don't know why someone's bladder is overactive."

Age is a common culprit in overactive bladder, and because of Charlotte County's large population of elderly residents, it probably has a higher incidence of the disorder than other parts of the country.

In the past, treatment with prescription drugs was often the preferred course, but Dr. Okomski points out those drugs do not

"I've had patients who become housebound as a result of incontinence."

— Dr. Charlene Okomski, board certified physician

always work, and patients frequently report unpleasant side effects from medication. More aggressive and invasive surgical procedures are sometimes employed, but unlike InterStim, those procedures are irreversible, regardless of the outcome or effectiveness.

Another feature that makes InterStim attractive is that it can be tested to determine if it will be successful on a patient.

"We do this test procedure in office," says Dr. Okomski. "It is even less invasive than the full procedure and only takes about fifteen minutes."

If the test procedure indicates that the treatment will be effective, the full procedure is then performed in a hospital under local anesthesia (it takes about 45 minutes) and the patient is back home the same day.

By electrically controlling nerve impulses to the bladder, Dr. Okomski says the frequency and urgency of urination can be reduced by about 50 percent in roughly 80 percent of those who receive the therapy.

"If we can cut frequency in half, this can have a tremendous impact on that person's quality of life, and it can be severe enough that it can even impact employment opportunities," she explains. "If we decrease urinary problems by about 50 percent, then someone who going to the bathroom 18 to 20 times a day may cut that around nine or 10. And if some-

one is getting up during the night four or five times, we might cut that to two. This can be tremendously liberating for the patient."

Patients who successfully undergo InterStim treatment say that, for the first time in years, they can actually go hours without making a trip to the bathroom.

"This means that sometimes a patient can travel or take a vacation without having that anxiety hanging over them," says Dr. Okomski. "People who know where all the public restrooms are in their hometown are sometimes fearful of going to strange places where they don't know those locations."

The embarrassment brought about the condition often prevents sufferers from seeking help. Furthermore, some men are reluctant to discuss the problem with a female physician, says Dr. Okomski. If a male patient would feel more comfortable receiving treatment from a man, Dr. Okomski says she often refers him to Dr. Andrew Weitzel, a board-certified urologist who also practices in Punta Gorda and is conversant with the treatment.

"There should be no shame or embarrassment attached this whatsoever," Dr. Okomski says.

Another feature of InterStim that is attractive to prospective patients is that it is entirely reversible. The implant can easily be removed, if the patient so desires. If the implant is withdrawn, however, the patient will revert to the level of incontinence that they were experiencing before the procedure was undertaken.

InterStim is not indicated in every instance, so an evaluation by a physician is the only way to determine its appropriateness for a potential patient. In cases in which a more serious underlying medical problem is the cause, other forms of treatment may be indicated.

But for those who are suffering from routine overactive bladder characterized by urge and frequency, the treatment can be the beginning of a new way of life.

"It is very fulfilling to see people return to a normal life, to be able to do things again without concern and anxiety," says Dr. Okomski, who came to Punta Gorda in 1997 and had been practicing in Delaware for five years prior to that. "This has been a wonderful experience for me as well. I've seen lives changed for the better." ■