

NECK TRAUMA CENTER NOW OPERATING IN LOWVILLE HOSPITAL REHAB FACILITY

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Edition: Both

Section: Local

Page: D8

Dateline: LOWVILLE

Lewis County General Hospital's Rehabilitation Department has opened a neck trauma center, and William M. Blunden, director of rehabilitation services at the county-owned hospital, believes the machine at the heart of the program - a Multi Cervical Unit from BTE Technologies, Hanover, Md. - is head and shoulders above traditional neck diagnosis and treatment methods. "It's been a godsend," he said.

Many of the patients who have utilized the machine thus far are ones with chronic, long-term neck problems, Mr. Blunden said. And after undergoing several treatments, he said, some are "out mowing lawns" and doing other vigorous activities they had been unable to do. "It's absolutely amazing what it will do," he said.

Because the hospital is such a "progressive facility," Mr. Blunden said, he was invited by BTE to speak about his department at an international sales conference in February in Denver. During the conference, he noticed the Multi Cervical Unit, or MCU, and was later able to persuade hospital management to buy one.

"It's a significant investment," Mr. Blunden said, declining to disclose its cost. "But the payback is quite quick." The machine was delivered in May and, following a month of training, has been put into full-time use. According to Mr. Blunden, only 35 or 36 other neck trauma centers in the United States - none of them in New York state - utilize such a system.

While Mr. Blunden initially estimated that two patients per day would use the machine, it's now being used by six to eight patients daily. "It's quadrupling our expectations," he said. Randy L. Lehman, a physical therapist at Lewis County General and director of the new North Country Neck Trauma Center, said the machine is used both for "evaluation and treatment of neck dysfunction."

Patients initially take an hour-long evaluation on the MCU, said Mr. Lehman, who is being assisted in the new center by fellow physical therapist Caryl Petrus. Then, he said, they typically undergo nine treatment sessions "based on the deficits we see" and have another evaluation to note the level of progress. He said patients usually do two or three of the half-hour treatment sessions per week. Patients are strapped into a head-restraint system, which gives the machine somewhat of a mad scientist feel, and the MCU - using a computer-generated voice - guides the person through a series of therapeutic, individualized exercises.

Despite the name of the center, Mr. Lehman said, the new machine is a long-term rehabilitation tool and wouldn't be used for immediate treatment of neck trauma. "We're probably not going to put you in this two days after you get whiplash in a motor vehicle accident," he said. The machine measures the range of motion and strength of a patient's neck in several directions, including side to side, back and forth and up and down. A nearby computer records the measurements and creates bar graphs that show how they compare with baseline measurements. Those protocols were developed through research done in Melbourne, Australia, Mr. Blunden said.

Before the MCU was installed, Mr. Lehman said, range of motion was determined manually using a large measuring compass. "There's a lot of room for error," he said of the old method. "If I do it, it will probably come out different than if Randy does it," Mr. Blunden added, noting that the new machine eliminates the need for such "subjective" testing.

As for the treatment of neck problems, Mr. Blunden said, the MCU works the neck muscles "throughout the entire motion" and makes the exercises previously prescribed to patients seem "archaic" in comparison. According to Mr. Blunden, the machine in June was used for 16 evaluations and 165 treatment sessions. "And we haven't even marketed it yet," he said, noting that most customers thus far have come through physician referrals or "word of mouth." Because of the machine's extensive use, Mr. Blunden said, he's "starting to consider" the purchase of a second MCU for his department.

According to a release from the hospital, the neck trauma center here is designed to treat people suffering from whiplash-related disorders, muscle tension headaches, general neck pain or problems involving cervical disc compression. For more information or an appointment call 376-5225.