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Hyperbaric oxygen therapy accelerates healing

Harrington opens center



Hyperbaric oxygen chamber technician Rick J. Grensavich oversees Paul A. Dion's treatment at The Wound Care Center at Harrington in Charlton. (SUBMITTED PHOTO)

By Brian Lee TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

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at the Wound Care Center.

The treatments are for select patients with chronic or hard-to-heal wounds.

Ms. Dion said she loves the staff and she bakes for them each day. She has been receiving treatments since July 19.

But this patient doesn't have a wound per se, said Susan M. Proulx, clinic coordinator. Chemotherapy and radiation treatments at Dana Farber Cancer Institute in Boston killed Ms. Dion's cancer but also caused necrosis or breakdown of the health of her lower jawbone, Ms. Proulx said.

This results in problems with her teeth. Ms. Dion's condition could result in a breakdown of her jawbone, but she's not at the stage, Ms. Proulx said.

The patient lies on a stretcher that's rolled into an acrylic see-through cylinder that has a flat-screen television and DVD player atop it.

Technician Rick J. Grensavitch tells Ms. Dion whenever she is about to view "a really good" "Grey's" episode. He never leaves the patient's side during the 90-minute sessions. Also, a doctor has to be on the same floor and be immediately available when the patient is in a chamber.

During screening, because of the oxygen-rich environment, the patient is checked for anything that would cause a fire. Hairspray, makeup, deodorant and jewelry are off limits. The johnnies provided by the center are 50 percent cotton.

Harrington HealthCare at Charlton, part of the Harrington HealthCare System that includes Harrington Hospital in Southbridge, is one of a handful of wound-care facilities that offer hyperbaric oxygen therapy in this region.

Heywood Hospital opened its Center for Wound Care and Hyperbaric Medicine in August 2008.

The closest others are in Springfield and Concord, according to Timothy J. Everett, program director. A state Department of Public Health spokeswoman said the state regulates and/or inspects hyperbaric oxygen chambers but does not keep a list of them.

A joint venture between Harrington and Diversified Clinical Services, a national wound care management company that has close to 300 similar relationships, the center opened June 21. Last month it began seeing patients for hyperbaric oxygen therapy.

Chronic wounds affect almost 2 million new patients each year nationally and at any given time between 8 million and 10 million people in the country suffer from a chronic or hard-to-heal wound, Mr. Everett said.

In Central Massachusetts and Northeastern Connecticut, 8,000 to 10,000 people might have some type of chronic wound, Mr. Everett said.

Chronic and hard-to-heal wounds are a growing problem. For some diabetics, these treatments can be the difference between losing some toes or part of a leg or foot, Ms. Proulx said.

Harrington looked into opening a wound-care center for several years. Edward H. Moore, president and chief executive officer, was looking for a service that was missing in the area that the organization could provide.

Ms. Dion, a home health aide who had to stop working because she had muscles removed during neck surgery, leaving her with limited use of her shoulder, said that before getting cancer she didn't know there was so much to do about it, even after the disease is in remission.

When dealing with side effects, "you have to look around for places like this," she said. "It's amazing that this place opened up at the time that I needed (it)."

Ms. Dion's oral surgeon sent her to the Charlton center for a consultation.

She received 20 hyperbaric treatments before having her teeth extracted during surgery last week. The treatments help to create smaller vessels to supply blood flow for Ms. Dion's condition, Ms. Proulx said. Another 10 treatments started after her teeth were removed. The latest surgery wasn't so bad, according to Ms. Dion, who said she wished she could have returned the same day to her chamber.

Ms. Dion said "it means the world to me" to have a facility so close to home. Being able to have morning sessions gives her more time with her 13- and 19-year-old daughters.

The five-times-weekly, 90-minute treatments are a major commitment.

"Oftentimes when someone has a wound or a condition and they reached that point where hyperbarics is an option, I think they've been struggling with this condition for so long that they're just happy that there's something that may help them," Ms. Proulx said.

Harrington has two chambers. They are all-pneumatic, so if the hospital lost electricity they would continue to run.

Hyperbaric oxygen therapy is fully covered by public insurance. As with most private insurance there can be a co-pay. Mr. Everett declined to say how much a session costs.

The chambers with their structures cost about \$125,000, Mr. Everett said.

The center will soon start to fully use both chambers and plans to install a third one,

he said.

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