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Portable dialysis treatment helping patients

By TAYA FLORES • tflores@jconline.com • August 18, 2009

Pam Papak of rural Rensselaer was infected with strep throat in college and the infection spread to her kidneys, causing damage.

She was able to function normally with medication, but a 2004 bout with breast cancer required chemotherapy, which lowered her kidney function to the point where she needed dialysis.

Consequently, Pam has used various dialysis treatments. But they resulted in discomfort or inconvenience.

While waiting for a kidney transplant, she finally started using a portable dialysis unit called NxStage System One, which allows her to stay home for her treatments.

"I am just healthier and I have control over it," said the 56 year old.

Dr. Stephen Ash, medical director of WellBound of Lafayette, said more patients are starting to use the portable units in their homes.

For instance, the center opened with one patient using the portable units in late 2006 and now 13 patients use the home-based dialysis machines.

WellBound trains patients with severe kidney disease to perform at-home dialysis.

Ash, who is also a nephrologist with Clarian Arnett Health, said the patients are healthier when they can use dialysis more frequently, which the portable system allows.

Regular dialysis at a center is usually done three times a week for three to five hours to remove toxins from the blood.

When Papak was receiving the in-center hemodialysis treatment, she had to travel about an hour away to Liberty Dialysis in Lafayette three times a week.

"It was far and it really made me terribly sick," she said.

Papak also used peritoneal dialysis before the portable system. The peritoneal dialysis technique removes toxins and fluids from the blood by filtering it through the patient's abdominal membrane or peritoneum.

But Pam said this method gave her back pain.

"It's pretty uncomfortable, because you have two liters of liquid in your abdomen at all times," she said.

Pam also obtained infections in her abdominal cavity as a result of the peritoneal dialysis, she said.

Ash said using the portable dialysis machines is safe for patients because the patient has motivation to do well and both the patient and the required home partner are trained on how to use the machine.

He also said the infection rate is low and the incidence of encountering a serious problem is less at home than it is at a hemodialysis center. For example, at home there is one-on-one care provided whereas center staff have more patients to attend.

Pam's husband, Brian Papak, runs the dialysis machine for Pam at their home.

"I think it's great because she feels better," he said.

He said at first it was a little intimidating because he realized that he would be in charge of exchanging his wife's blood.

While using the portable system at their home, Brian was meticulous about setting up the system correctly to get Pam ready for treatment.

He cleaned the catheter in Pam's chest that attaches to the machine, he also injected a blood thinner and saline solution into the catheter before the machine started to filter the blood.

While he did this, his eyes were fixated on the machine, which is ultra-sensitive to any glitches such as air in the blood lines. Brian's eyes also repeatedly bounced from the machine to a checklist, to make sure he was following all the needed directions.

In the care of her husband, Pam was at ease sitting in her chair.

"The hard part is setting up, then once I'm on, he can go about his business," she said. "So now I can spend the next two hours reading."