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Editor's note – September is National Pain Awareness Month

Different techniques can help ease chronic pain, return patients' smiles

DALLAS – Sept. 20, 2006 – Larry Waters' missionary work to spread the Gospel to foreign nations fulfilled his heart's passion for decades, but it left his head pounding.

Beginning in 1998, he experienced severe headaches that eventually forced him to return home.

Medicine provided little relief for the Garland resident's cluster headaches, which occurred every day at the same time for several days in succession and caused facial throbbing, until he came to the Eugene McDermott Center for Pain Management at UT Southwestern Medical Center. There Dr. Leland Lou, associate professor of anesthesiology and pain management, performed minor surgery to deaden a nerve that was causing the problem.

"I used to have daily cluster headaches – sometimes three or four. The pain was almost unbearable, but since the surgical procedure, I have been relatively free of pain," Dr. Waters said. "The Lord truly led me to Dr. Lou and the pain clinic."

For National Pain Awareness Month, Dr. Lou is touting the various ways people with chronic pain – including more than 50 million Americans – can deal with chronic issues of head, back, cancer, arthritic and other types of pain, which can persist and cause physical debilitation and emotional stress.

Some techniques to manage chronic pain include:

- Medications – Over-the-counter aspirin and ibuprofen can help relieve pain, while steroids and injections are available only by prescription.
- Exercise or relaxation – Physical therapy, aquatics, yoga and massage programs can increase the body's functionality and lessen pain.
- Acupuncture – Trained therapists aim to ease pain by inserting thin needles into specific points on the body.
- Anesthetics – Medications that can numb or block nerves that signal pain.
- Electrical stimulation – A technique to lessen pain by stimulating nerve fibers through the skin.

People in chronic pain should visit a doctor to see what might best work for them, Dr. Lou said. For example, the right medication can make all the difference.

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One of Dr. Lou's patients, Ann Walton of Fort Worth, was suffering from severe chest, arm and elbow pain following a double mastectomy. Heavy doses of pain medications didn't help, so Dr. Lou switched her to non-addictive nerve pain medicines, which effectively calmed her pain.

"I was really miserable. I couldn't do anything. Now I'm in much better shape," Mrs. Walton said. "I can smile again."

The McDermott Center, one of the few pain clinics in Texas with on-site pain specialists, physical therapists and psychologists, uses the latest scientific advances and least-invasive procedures to diagnose, locate and treat everything from back pain to neuropathic pain.

Minimally invasive surgeries are done routinely in order to remove scar tissue – a process called lysis of adhesion – and alleviate pain in people with back or neck problems.

Dedicated fluoroscopy is a non-surgical procedure that uses an X-ray system to allow physicians to target a precise location when applying pulse radiofrequency therapy, which interrupts pain messages to the brain.

In addition, on-site behavioral medicine specialists teach stress management and relaxation techniques. In the center's therapy gym, physical therapists help patients increase their range of motion, build muscle endurance, and reduce tension.

"We want to relieve patients' pain without major surgery," Dr. Lou said. "That allows them to begin physical therapy sooner, saves money and allows them to feel better quicker."

Dr. Lou is using a targeted approach to first diagnose reasons for patients' pain, then identifying problematic areas and treating them.

"Pain is a symptom, not a diagnosis. We're really trying to diagnose the underlying problem," Dr. Lou said. "So you can't just be a pain specialist. If someone comes in with a headache, you have to know that pain can be a signal of a brain aneurysm that is about to pop."

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