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Lending a hand

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When Shirley Harris first suffered a stroke last September, it left her in a wheelchair and without the use of her left arm or hand.

"It was very difficult for me to accept because now I needed the care and the treatment," said Harris, 58, a registered nurse who lives in Newark.

Unable to do things such as dress herself or even pick up a spoon left Harris depressed and feeling like she would never regain what the stroke had taken from her.

She was wrong.

A new rehab device introduced to Harris by her therapist at Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation in East Orange has helped restore much of her function. Called the SaeboFlex, the spring-loaded mechanical brace has enabled Harris to pick up objects, dress herself and even raise her arm above her head -- even when she is not wearing it.

"I went from despair to hope. The world needs to know about this," Harris said with tears in her eyes as she underwent a therapy session recently at Kessler.

Custom-designed for each patient and invented by occupational therapists, the SaeboFlex positions the wrist and fingers into extension in preparation for functional activities like picking up a hair brush. The extension spring system then assists in re-opening the hand to release the object.

The SaeboFlex is not just helping patients who have suffered strokes. People with traumatic brain injury, spinal cord injuries and even individuals with cerebral palsy have benefited, according to one of the device's inventors.

"We are seeing amazing results. We have seen patients up to 24 years post-stroke show progress," said Henry Hoffman, an occupational therapist in White Plains, N.Y., who invented the SaeboFlex with his brother, John Farrell.

Claudia Kelly, 42, of Florham Park suffered a severe hemorrhagic stroke in 1977, leaving her left side completely paralyzed. She had not been able to open her hand or use her arm, but things started changing after she got the SaeboFlex a few weeks ago at Kessler.

Kelly can now open her hand at least partially with the device in place and performs tasks such as picking up balls and placing them in crates. Kelly can also lift her hand over her head.

"It makes me feel much happier, like I am accomplishing something," said Kelly, who lives with her parents and is hoping to regain more function, even without the device.

During a recent session at Kessler while wearing the device, Harris was able to pick up 80 balls and place them into crates either to her left or right within a span of about 10 to 15 minutes. She has been so inspired by her progress -- Harris has been using the device since January-- she is hoping to one day return to work taking care of patients at Christ Hospital in Jersey City.

"We could not simulate that repetition of movement as therapists," said Dana Farino, an occupational therapist at Kessler who is working with Harris. "This is a remedial tool, but it's different from any other modality we have."

Farino received special training in use of the device from the SaeboFlex company, which started three years ago. She is among a small group of therapists in New Jersey who are using SaeboFlex, which strengthens the hand muscles, as well as the forearm and upper extremities.

The SaeboFlex costs \$765 for patients without insurance, while insured patients are charged \$850, according to Hoffman. He said Medicare pays 80 percent of the cost, with the remaining 20 percent usually picked up by secondary insurance.

A number of private, commercial insurers also now provide coverage for the device, although a deductible may be required, he said.

New Jersey patients on Medicaid are not yet covered, as Hoffman's company has not yet become an official Medicaid provider here.

Harris, who also had to learn to walk again, said the insurance she has through her job, Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey, picked up most of the tab for the SaeboFlex in her case, although she was required to pay \$184 out of pocket.

Therapists say the need for such a device is clear. Every 45 seconds in the United States, someone suffers a stroke, which is an interruption in circulation to part of the brain. About 700,000 Americans will have a stroke this year, making it the nation's No. 3 killer, according to the American Stroke Association.

"Anything that could help a patient regain useful function of a limb and help with activities of daily living, personal hygiene and make them more independent would be a tremendous advance," said Richard Hodosh, the physician who chairs the Stroke Task Force for the Heritage Affiliate of the American Heart Association, which includes New Jersey.

Farino, the Kessler therapist, said it is quite easy for stroke patients to get discouraged about their lack of recovery because traditional therapy generally is a "slow process" that often does not yield the kind of results they hope for. Even electrical stimulation has its limitations and does not produce the same results as the SaeboFlex, she added.

"Now, as therapists, we are not going to plateau," she said. "You are seeing function you wouldn't have seen before."

The good thing is that patients can also take the device home with them and practice exercises given to them by the therapist.

Martin Gizzi, chairman of the New Jersey Neuroscience Institute at JFK Medical Center in Edison, said he would like to see a head-to-head clinical trial comparing patients who use the SaeboFlex to those who receive only traditional therapy, which may include certain medications to reduce spasticity.

"It seems like the sooner you could use this device, the better the results would be," he said.

More information on SaeboFlex can be obtained on the company Web site at www.saebo.com or by calling (888) 284-5433.

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