

FOR RELEASE: October 1, 2007

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BIG IMPACT IN LESS TIME FOR STROKE RECOVERY

Winona, Minn. - No one expects to wake up one morning and have the whole world be different. Unfortunately, for several thousand people around the world every year, that is exactly what happens when he or she has a cerebrovascular accident (CVA), more commonly known as a stroke.

Stroke affects individuals differently – some experience no or mild impairments such as a change in vision, slower processing of written or verbal information, or diminished strength. Others may have severe impairments like an inability to speak, to use a limb or walk; to understand language and/or difficulties in swallowing food or liquids.

One local care center is working to diminish the impact of stroke through the use of technology to help clients recover faster and with greater independence. Saint Anne of Winona utilizes a weight bearing gait training system to help clients learn to walk again.

Local resident and retired veterinarian, Gerald Brancich is a successful graduate of the Saint Anne program. His previously independent lifestyle changed drastically when, on Feb. 27, he had a stroke. Hospitalized for six weeks, Brancich spent nearly two weeks in the intensive care unit (ICU) and another four working on his rehabilitation.

He left the ICU in a wheelchair, with little use of his right arm and hand. He was only able to walk with help. During therapy in the hospital, he progressed to walking in the parallel bars and with a cane, but still used the wheelchair most of the time. “I wasn’t confident using the cane. I was afraid of falling,” Brancich explained.

Brancich was discharged from the hospital to Saint Anne’s where he had a goal. “I wanted to get home as soon as possible,” he said. “I also wanted to get back as much independence in my life as I could.”

In order for him to go home with his wife, Alice, Brancich needed to be able to walk without assistance, go up and down five steps to get into his house, get in and out of the car, and be able to perform most of his own personal care.

After a week of physical therapy for strengthening, Brancich was introduced to the ceiling suspended partial weight bearing gait training system. “I thought it was a good idea,” he said. “I could see the potential of how to be more mobile and how it could help me build up my strength.

While working on his walking, Brancich wore a safety harness that supported him. Straps from the harness rise over his shoulders and connect to a motor in the ceiling. For the next two weeks, he worked out, learning to walk safely with his walker, cane, and even practice climbing stairs and walk without his leg brace.

“It (the harness) really helped my confidence because I knew I couldn’t fall. If you had asked me to walk without my leg brace and with a cane, I would have said, ‘No Way.’ But, with the harness, I felt comfortable trying anything,” he said.

His wife agreed, “I could see his confidence go up and his balance was getting better, even when we wasn’t walking in the harness.”

“I love the harness,” said Allison Biesanz, Saint Anne physical therapist. “It helps the residents feel more confident and it makes therapy safer for them and our staff. Jerry was very comfortable with the harness and was willing to try exercises and activities that would be out of his comfort zone, and mine, without it.”

Saint Anne’s system is a new design prototype. The manufacturer is working to increase comfort, mobility, and to offer help to a larger population of patients whose level of need and ability to participate are more limited.

The only drawback Brancich found was the harness wasn’t the easiest thing to put on for him or the therapists. But, he definitely would recommend it to others, “I think it will shorten people’s time in rehab, if they commit to trying and using it. I think I got home faster and better because of it.”