

Doctor touts hyperbarics for brain injuries (VIDEO, PHOTOS)

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FORT WALTON BEACH - A local doctor is involved in a national study that could result in a standard treatment for minor traumatic brain injuries that does not involve medications.

Dr. Eddie Zant was an anesthesiologist for 29 years before he started working in hyperbarics. He says he wishes he had spent his first 29 years in hyperbarics.

It's exciting. You're going to hear more and more and more about it. There are a million guys in need of the treatment, Zant said.

Hyperbaric chambers increase the amount of oxygen the brain gets by adding pressure. The high level of oxygen treats the injuries. In addition to the traumatic brain injuries seen in military patients, Zant uses hyperbarics to treat stroke victims, people with limb injuries and people with cerebral palsy and autism.

He has treated people of all ages. The youngest was 10 months.

When Dr. Paul Harch, director of the Hyperbaric Medicine Fellowship Program at Louisiana State University Medical School, testified to the U.S. House of Representatives Veterans Affairs Committee last July, he cited Zant's previous studies.

Zant worked with military veterans (including a retired Army general) and active-duty special tactics airmen from Hurlburt Field. In his testimony, Harch said successful hyperbaric treatments saved the government millions of dollars in future medical care, disability payments and recruiting/training costs to replace the injured airmen.

Zant and colleagues from the International Hyperbaric Medical Foundation are looking for about 1,000 people suffering from traumatic brain injuries, post-traumatic stress disorder or depression to participate in the current clinical study.

It takes about 40 treatments to heal traumatic brain injuries. In some cases, 80 treatments are needed.

Sometimes, the Department of Defense administers cognitive tests before deployments. Zant administers the same tests to his patients before treating them and again after 40 treatments. He has found that people with mild traumatic brain injuries have slow reaction times and delayed working and spatial memories. They also have trouble learning new things.

Zant has had patients who have gotten lost on their daily commutes to work and on trips to the grocery.

Most of the study pool will be military members who have suffered injuries while deployed. Because Veterans Affairs does not cover the cost of the 40 hyperbaric treatments, Zant is treating participants for free. He also is seeking funding and is optimistic that the Department of Defense eventually will cover the costs.

The hardest part of the study has been recruitment. So far, Zant has recruited 17 people with traumatic brain injuries, more than any other participating researcher. None of the patients are women.

Zant said there are plenty of local people who need the hyperbaric treatment but are unaware of his services.

He has a checklist of symptoms he uses to diagnose new patients. He says the brain injuries do not show up on an MRI or CAT scan, but the patients have similar experiences.

Usually, the injuries were caused by improvised explosive devices or rocket-propelled grenades, and the victims were unconscious for a short time.

When they return home they have trouble sleeping, keeping their jobs and maintaining relationships. The victims often take antidepressants.

The hyperbaric treatments are not meant to replace existing treatments. Zant said the hyperbaric chamber is not a substitute for the antidepressants and sleeping aids, although many stop taking them after a few treatments.

Everybody's different. Some of these guys get 100 percent better, some of them, 80 or 90. But they all get better, Zant said.

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