

The real Beauty of Botox - Busy clinic uses popular anti-wrinkle therapy to help ease disabling tight-muscle disorders

Article by Megan Ogilvie; Health Reporter

One of the busiest Botox clinics in Toronto doesn't deal with wrinkled foreheads or crinkled crow's feet. Instead, it helps people walk and talk.

Doctors at the spasticity clinic at West Park Healthcare Centre use botulinum toxin, or Botox, to treat the condition which causes muscles to continually and involuntarily contract.

Spasticity can set in after a spinal cord or brain injury. It also affects people with multiple sclerosis or cerebral palsy as well as stroke survivors. But Dr. Chris Boulias says spasticity is underdiagnosed and up to 90 per cent of Ontarians with the condition don't get proper treatment.

"People don't look at spasticity as high up on the list of things to treat," he says, because the condition, while uncomfortable and sometimes painful, is not life threatening.

Five years ago, Corazon Syed had an aneurysm that left her left arm and leg stiff with spasticity. She couldn't walk without help, stairs were an overwhelming obstacle and even simple tasks, such as dressing and washing, became impossible.

"I woke up in the hospital and I was paralyzed," she recalls.

Today, the 53-year-old Woodbridge resident is lying on an examination table at West Park. Her left leg the elbow and pressed into her chest, looks like it is being held in by an invisible sling.

Boulias grasps her left hand and tries to pry open her fingers, which are clenched into a fist.

"If a person has this posture for a long time, they can't wash their palms and it really smells because bacteria grow there," says Boulias. "Sometimes the goal is not to make the arm move, but just loosen the fingers so the palm doesn't have to smell. It's a very small goal, but it makes a big difference to that person."

West Park clinic, near Eglinton Ave. and Jane St., opened in 2003 and now has about 200 patients, making it the busiest in the country. There are several other spasticity clinics in the GTA, but demands far exceeds supply. That's why Boulias and colleague Dr. Farook Ismail hold four sessions a year to teach other physicians how to treat the condition.

Stretching programs and drugs that relax muscles can help, but the drugs often cause side effects, such as urinary incontinence, because they relax every muscle in the body.

About 40 per cent of West Park's spasticity patients get Botox injections, which only target affected muscles. Spasticity causes nerves to continually fire neurotransmitters to muscle, making it constantly contract. The botulinum toxin molecules go to the nerve endings and stop the release of neurotransmitters.

Syed has to have 16 Botox injections into different muscles along her forearm, leg and foot. As Boulias inserts the needle into her forearm, she softly moans and covers her face with her hand.

"It's okay, sweetie, it's okay," he says, adjusting the needle to get the right muscle. "You're okay. We're almost done."

At the end of the 30-minute session, Boulias watches Syed slowly walk down the hall to her husband. Even though she needs a cane and a brace to walk, he points out that her gait is more natural than it was even an hour ago and her arm is hanging at a more natural angle. "I'm not saving her life right now," Boulias says. "But I am making her life better."

*Please consult your physician for more information on spasticity treatment centers in Ottawa.