

LYMPHEDEMA

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By DAVID ROBLEDO
The Monitor

MCALLEN — Breast cancer. Two words that can spark a rush of fear and worry. When faced with a diagnosis of breast cancer, a woman's concerns are rarely whether or not she'll experience complications after an operation. First and most, the most important job at hand is to find out why where the cancer is, and then remove it as quickly as possible.

When a doctor warns that lymphedema — a swelling of the body caused by an accumulation of lymphatic fluid — may result from having breast surgery, that warning usually causes little concern, said McAllen resident Margaret Mann, 65, who diagnosed with breast cancer in 1988. Mann remembers clearly that when her doctor warned her of lymphedema, the condition sounded significant compared to the threat of cancer. Mann's surgery was successful, and for eight years she took the precautions her doctor suggested to avoid lymphedema at bay. She didn't lift heavy objects, didn't draw blood from the arm that was affected by surgery. She wore gloves while doing housework, gardening, and any other activity that might bring on a bruise or a scratch that could cause infection and trigger lymphedema's characteristic swelling.

According to Natasha Odendaal, a physical therapist at McAllen Medical Center, many women who undergo breast-related surgery are poorly warned — and sometimes not warned at all — about the threat of lymphedema.

Doctors aren't telling their patients about lymphedema prevention, or showing them ways of massage and other techniques for treatment, or telling them that a year or two after surgery, a woman can develop it," she said.



Mary Thomas, a physical therapist at Innovative Therapy of McAllen, recently administers Lymph Drainage Therapy on a patient.



Dots indicate where flow of lymphatic fluid is very depressed. Once the fibrotic tissue is addressed, the arrows indicate the improved flow.

about lymphedema by her doctor. But despite precautions, lymphedema set in.

Eight years after Mann had surgery, her arm started to swell. And swell. And swell — until it was about twice its normal size.

Mann says she did nothing unusual to bring on the swelling. She was on vacation in the Texas Hill Country in spring of 1994. Her husband drove while Mann reclined in the passenger's seat, resting her right arm near the window, the warm, Central Texas sun shining gently on her arm. Suddenly her arm started to swell. Apparently the heat of the sun triggered the onset of lymphedema.

Lymphedema is caused by poor circulation of lymphatic fluid, and, in the case of those who undergo breast surgery, is usually the result of having lymph nodes removed from the area where surgery is to take place.

"Everywhere you have tissue, you have lymphatic fluid," explained physical therapist Mary Thomas, who has studied an innovative therapy called Lymph Drainage Therapy, developed by Dr. Bruno Chikly from Arizona, who has received recognition for his work on the lymph system. Chikly's technique combines light massage with a special wrapping of swollen areas. Books and articles written on Lymph Drainage Therapy document dramatic results, and have been shown to reduce extreme swelling — commonly known as elephantitis — to almost-normal proportions. Thomas uses Chikly's technique to treat patients at her practice in McAllen, Innovative Therapy.

The lymph system compliments blood flow, Thomas explained. Blood doesn't reach all of the body's tissues. So in order for white blood cells — which combat infection and disease — to reach the body's extremities, white blood cells are literally pushed through the cell wall of arteries and veins, where they enter the body's lymphatic system — floating to infected regions via lymphatic fluid, she said.

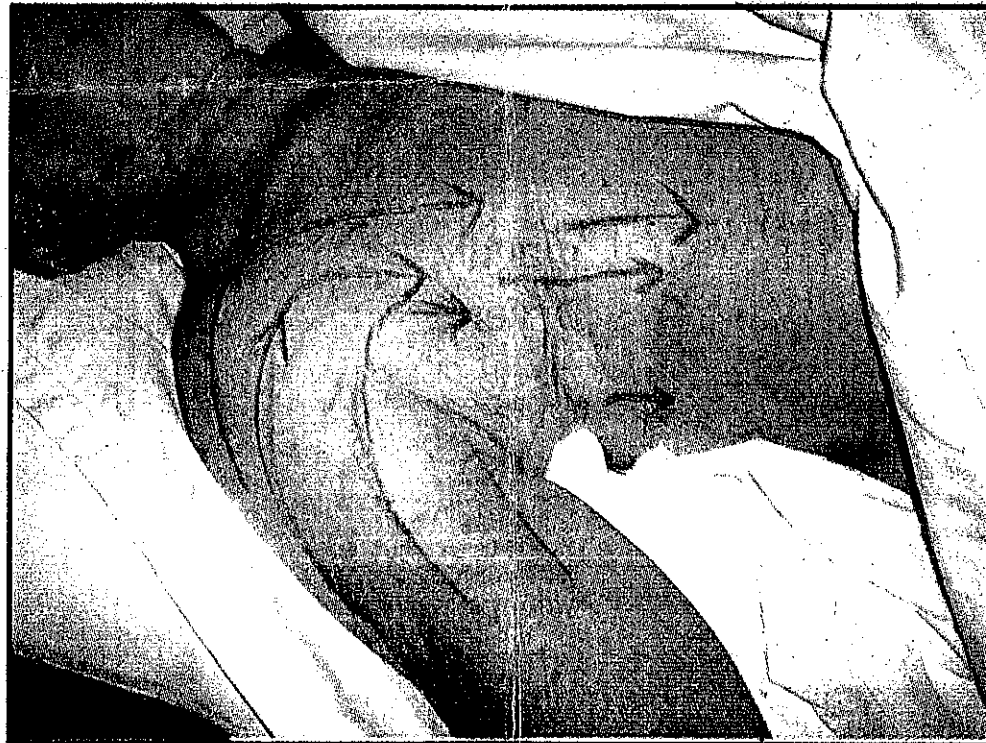
But the blood stream needs those white blood cells back. The body's lymph nodes allow those white blood cells to re-enter the bloodstream. Once the white blood cells are pushed out of the blood system and into the lymphatic system, the lymphatic system then sucks in those white blood cells as they're being carried through tissue via lymphatic fluid. The lymph nodes themselves suck in the fluid that carries the white blood cells, and the lymph system does the job of collecting that fluid and dumping it back into the blood stream before blood reaches the heart, Thomas said.

Doctors can determine the extent of cancer by removing a sampling of 15 to 20 lymph nodes from the cancerous area, and then testing them for the disease. Because lymph nodes are removed, the lymphatic flow is disturbed, which can bring on the swelling of lymphedema, Thomas explained.

Removing lymph nodes to test for cancer, however,



A posterior view of the massage technique, after the fibrotic tissue is addressed.



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is an out-of-date practice, and is rarely used, explained Dr. Benjamin West, oncologist at the South Texas Cancer Center. These days, doctors learn how far cancer has spread by removing only a few lymph nodes.

"A sentinel lymph node biopsy injects dye in the axilla and can localize lymph nodes. Pathologists look at the sentinels, and if there's no tumors, they don't remove any more lymph nodes," he explained.

But if cancer is found, then a larger number of lymph nodes — 15 to 20 — will be removed, West said.

And it's the removal of lymph nodes themselves that sets the stage for lymphedema. The more lymph nodes removed, the higher the chances for eventual swelling, and eventual complications from swelling, which is where the real danger of lymphedema lies.

"Infection can set in," Thomas said. "When it gets to that point, I won't treat patients — I'll refer them to a physician."

Thomas' office is strewn with articles, pamphlets and photos of the condition. Some of the patients she's treated have entered her office hardly

able to move their arms, their wrists and fingers swollen so big that their hands can't be shut, and their shoulders swollen so large, they can't stretch out their arms. Photos documenting worst-case scenarios show arms and legs swollen to grotesque proportions, with skin stretched so tight it seems ready to burst.

Some may think that lymphedema might be a small price to pay for eliminating cancer, but the effects of lymphedema on a woman's life can be scarring.

Florence Chapa, 48, from McAllen had cancer-related breast surgery in September of 2001. She thinks that doctors don't take lymphedema seriously enough, and as a result, many women never seek therapy.

"Some women don't go through therapy. But if you ask them, they'll tell you they're fine. But what happens is they

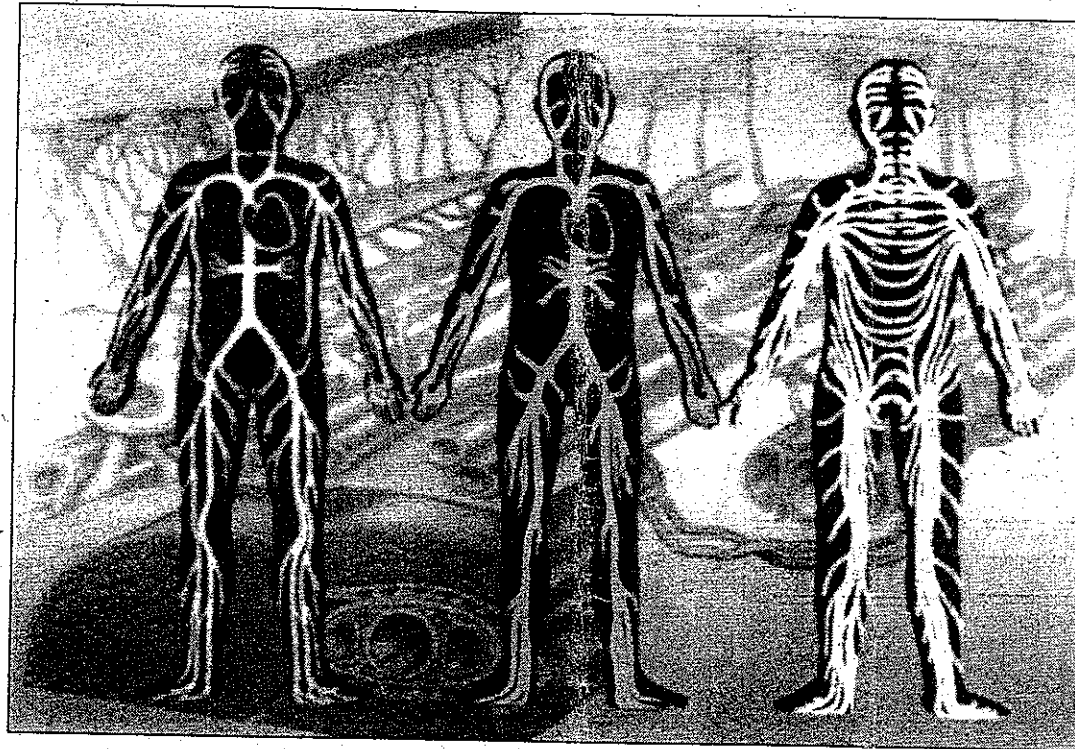


Photo courtesy of Jobst information pamphlet

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— Dr. Benjamin West, oncologist at the South Texas Cancer Center

learn to compensate. They don't reach with that arm. They learn how to get around without using that arm," she explained.

Chapa's concerns are backed up by both Odendaal and Thomas, who think that physicians could better inform patients about the risks and

treatments of lymphedema.

"A lot of patients tell me that their doctor didn't think that swelling was a problem, or that doctors just look at the swelling and say 'That's normal.' But patients don't feel that way. They've got this heavy, huge limb that's exhausting to move around all day," Thomas said.

According to Chapa, her doctor didn't seem too

concerned with the swelling she experienced soon after surgery. But the problems she was having were painful, and kept her from living a normal life.

"You can't lift your arm. You can't close your car door. You can't drive. The vibrations from the steering wheel cause pain. Your shoulder and ligaments can freeze up," Chapa said.

But with proper therapy, lymphedema's effects can be dramatically reduced, allowing its victims to lead more normal

lives.

"I feel so much better. I've had therapy. I've had massage. I've had lymphatic therapy. I've had light massage. But it doesn't tell you about it. It's not consistent with what you don't know," she said.

Chapa's testimony about the effectiveness of lymphatic therapy is consistent with what she has received. "I've had lymphatic therapy, but I don't receive therapy, I don't get the desired results. Although some women get better to other than me, there are some therapies that aren't medically sound. Any woman seeking lymphatic therapy should consult with a physician and also thorough lymphatic therapy. Thomas and West

Besides cancer-related breast surgery, lymphedema sometimes results in other surgeries, especially after any trauma should be tended to, Thomas said.

For more information, consult your doctor. In McAllen, extensive lymphatic therapy is provided by Mary Thomas at Lymphatic Therapy at 994-17th St. Joy McDonald at Fidelity Regional Hospital. Some treatment is provided by Odendaal at McAllen Medical Center at

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Therapies for Lymphedema

■ Lymph Drainage Therapy

Utilizes light massage to stimulate lymph flow. Therapist works with the natural rhythm of the lymphatic system, incorporating a technique called mapping, which draws from Eastern acupuncture and acupressure body charts to find each individual specific lymph flow.

■ The Dr. Volder Method

Uses light massage similar to Lymph Drainage Therapy, but without the mapping technique.

■ Wrapping

Non-stretch wraps are placed around the affected body parts. With each movement, the wrap stimulates the skin, encouraging lymphatic flow.

■ Complete Drainage Therapy

Combines Lymph Drainage Therapy and wrapping.

■ Pumps

Displaces accumulated fluid by sheer pressure. The pump applies compressed air to squeeze swollen areas and mechanically force fluid up with external pressure. The Upledger Institute — which trains therapists in the techniques of Lymph Drainage Therapy and Complete Drainage Therapy — cautions against the use of pumps, since pumps ignore the lymphatic system's natural flow.

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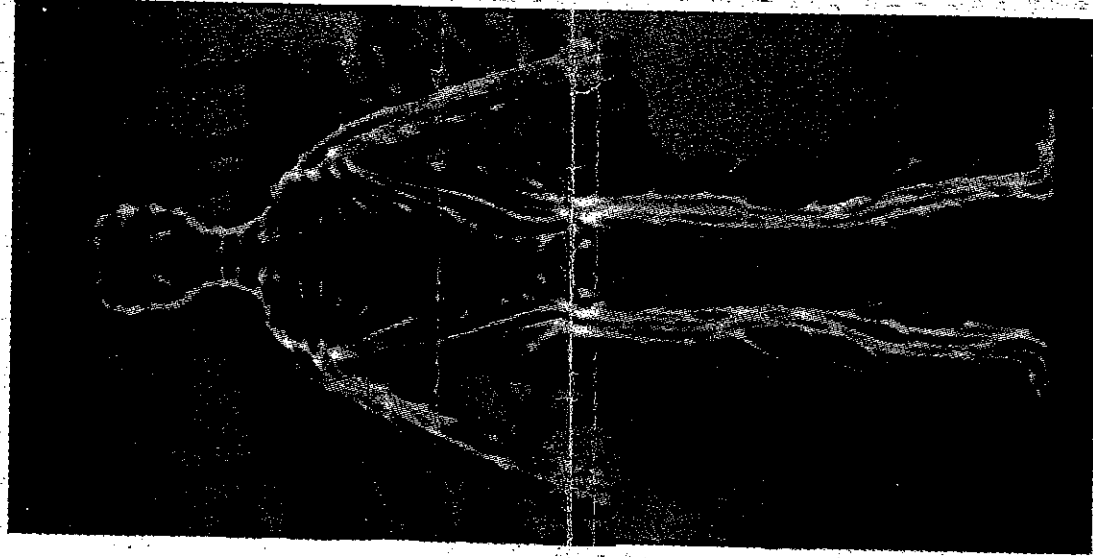


Photo courtesy of Jobst Information pamphlet

Lymphedema insurance coverage limited at best

By DAVID ROBLEDO
The Monitor

Considering that lymphedema affects one percent of the population — according to statistics from the Upledger Institute in Florida — insurance coverage for the condition is limited at best. Most private insurance companies provide adequate to acceptable coverage for lymphedema, covering therapy and related expenses like compression wrap supplies and compression garments, explained therapist Mary Thomas from Innovative Therapy in McAllen. But according to Thomas — as well as other local therapists and lymphedema victims — Medicaid and Medicare both have serious shortcomings. Medicaid offers no compensation for physical therapy services for adults, and Medicare allows only one to three weeks of treatment once in a patient's lifetime, but doesn't cover sleeves, gloves and other materials needed for comprehensive treatment, Thomas explained.

Both therapists and patients — like lymphedema victim Florence Chapa from McAllen — think that having treatment early on can save everyone money in the long run.

"I have to say that every woman who goes through (breast) surgery should go through physical therapy six to eight weeks after surgery. Having therapy is going to save long-term on my insurance costs. Not waiting until my arm is swollen or infected," Chapa said.

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