

Life After Stroke

Research Study Opening New Pathways



Maureen Michalski, MPT, DPT (far right) of the Center for Independence Through Conductive Education, works with research study participants on symmetrical arm positioning, alignment, bilateral grasp and strengthening. Study participants include (left to right) Dan Nicholson, Vince Evans, Ted Waltmire and Diane Deacy.

It appears that stroke survivors are creating new pathways in their brains — and their lives — thanks to an intensive 10-week research study program conducted by faculty from GSU's College of Health and Human Services, in collaboration with The Center for Independence through Conductive Education in Countryside.

The research study resulted from complementary grants written by Roberta O'Shea, PT, DPT, Ph.D., a Professor in the Department of Physical Therapy in GSU's College of Health and Human Services and Renee Theiss, Ph.D., Assistant Professor in the Departments of Occupational Therapy and Physical Therapy.

Dr. O'Shea's grant funded a 10-week Conductive Education (CE) intervention provided by Gabriella Molnar, CET, and Maureen Michalski, MPT, DPT of The Center for Independence through Conductive Education in Countryside. Dr. Theiss' grant funded imaging the brains of the CE participants before and after the 10-week program. The imaging was done at Northwestern Medicine with the help of Todd Parrish, Ph.D., Department of Radiology.

Making New Inroads Through Conductive Education

In the past, Conductive Education (see sidebar) had been used primarily to promote independence for children with motor impairments.

For this study, in contrast, four adult stroke survivors participated in an intensive 10-week course of conductive education exercises. Though further study among a larger group is required, preliminary studies have shown that improvements in movement function following the CE training were accompanied by a change in the stroke survivors' MRI scans, indicating the possible creation of new neural circuitry or perhaps the enhancement and strengthening of existing circuitry, or the activation of latent circuitry, Dr. Theiss said.

"Nothing like this had been done before in the U.S., to the best of my knowledge," O'Shea said. "I thought if we could apply this intervention (conductive education), people could become more capable... Our study shows that hand function improved, independence improved and neural pathways have improved, which is phenomenal."

"They say the brain never stops learning," noted Diane Deacy of Willowbrook, one of the study participants. Deacy had a stroke three and one-half years ago.

"It's most important to realize that Conductive Education is totally different from traditional physical therapy," Deacy said. "In traditional therapy we focus on just the affected part of the body. But in CE we use both sides of the body, and we try to involve the affected side more. I told Robbie that I wish I had the CE earlier."

One of the greatest benefits of CE training, Deacy said, is the group environment in which it is performed. All four study participants worked as peers together, rather than one-on-one with a therapist.

"You watch and learn from your peers to see how they work with their affected side," Deacy said. "We're all at different stages in our stroke recovery, and we give each other encouragement. It's most rewarding to see our progress as a group. We continue to exercise one day a week together."

'Definite Improvement Across the Board'

Fellow CE study participant Vince Evans of Bellwood couldn't agree more with Deacy. "Working in a group, we were able to push each other and encourage each other," Evans said. "It helped me understand my limitations, but gave me confidence that I can do more than what I thought."

Evans had a stroke in November, 2013, at the age of 48, resulting in right side paralysis. He's made great gains since then, first through traditional rehabilitation (occupational therapy, physical therapy and speech therapy) at places like Marianjoy and Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago.

Conductive Education's use of repetitive movements accompanied by spoken narration has been of great benefit, he believes. Evans also credits the "awesome" instruction and support from Molnar and Michalski at the Center for Independence through Conductive Education.

"They were a perfect fit for this program," Evans said. "They knew how to work with each and every one of us; they pushed us in the right way, building on our strengths. I see definite improvement across the board."

'It's a process. I'm not giving up.'

"Pretty amazing," is how Ted Waltmire describes what he has experienced since his involvement in the 10-week CE study. As Waltmire describes it, his brain has been given permission to try new things.

Waltmire's stroke, at the age of 55, took him quite by surprise. Now 61, he's experienced an increased range of movement which he attributes to the Conductive Education exercises he's performed: things like cracking peanuts with his weak hand, or running an obstacle course with stairs and inclines. Today he's able to stand and walk barefoot to the bathroom at night without having to put on shoes for balance; he can also grasp and hold a book or tear open a bag of chips with his weak hand.

"I've tried things that I wouldn't do a year ago. One benefit is in working with three other stroke survivors, you see where you are in relationship to others," Waltmire said. "It was helpful to me to see how far I had come in six years. When you live with the reminders of a stroke every day, you don't see the little things. I thought, five years in I'd have all my abilities back. It's a process. I'm not giving up."

Far from it. Waltmire is working on playing the piano again one day (with the help of an engineered device to support his left hand), and he has taken improv and writing classes at Second City. His musical about life after a stroke, "The Mighty Ted – The Unexpected Journey," has already hit the Chicago stage. Waltmire is currently working on producing an even bigger show.

The future of Conductive Education programming for stroke patients looks just as bright. Dr. O'Shea and Dr. Theiss at GSU are working on a second grant that, if funded, would allow them to study a larger sample size. Hopefully, the American Heart Association will endorse Conductive Education in the future, especially as further research documents its benefits to stroke survivors. Dr. Michalski at The Center for Independence plans to adopt the conductive education program as a full-time program for clients with stroke. She is speaking to a number of stroke support groups and physicians to help spread the word about Conductive Education.

What is Conductive Education?

Often described as rehabilitation through learning, Conductive Education was created by Dr. Andras Peto in Budapest, Hungary, in 1948. Conductive Education is a unique, intensive method of special education designed to promote active learning and maximized functional independence for children (and now, adults) who are attempting to overcome a motor disability from any of the following conditions: stroke, cerebral palsy, spina bifida, traumatic brain injury, cerebral vascular accidents, etc.

One of the key elements of Conductive Education is the group setting. Working together provides a powerful incentive for participants, while allowing for individualization and adjustment to personal needs. The group also benefits from peer-directed learning (e.g., watching how peers get up from a stool to use their walker). Conductive Education focuses on the whole person, recognizing physical, social, intellectual and emotional aspects of learning.

Make Someone's Life Better

Anthony Bucki : Making a Difference

Interprofessional Education

New Research Pathways

Grads Make Their Mark

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This issue of our magazine, *Make Someone's Life Better*, focuses on the many ways that our College of Health and Human Services faculty, students, and alumni are making a difference in the lives of others.

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