

Research team eases recovery from head and neck cancer

BY GEOFF MCMASTER

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December 2, 2004 – Two years ago, life took a harrowing, 180-degree turn for Steven Csorba. At the age of 38, the non-smoking, divorced father of three was diagnosed with neck and throat cancer, and the surgery that followed was nothing short of horrific.

“The procedure they did was called a bi-lateral mandibular swing,” said Csorba. “They cut through your jaw, down through the neck, rip your face off, and after 14 hours of surgery, they rebuild the throat using parts of your arm.”

After the surgery he spent 10 days with literally no sleep, trying to train the new muscle tissue to swallow. “Every time you swallow mucus, the sensation is, ‘I’m going to die,’ because you’re choking yourself. It was like living in an Alfred Hitchcock/Stephen Spielberg/Stephen King alien horror movie.”

What followed the surgery, however, was every bit as trying. The radiation treatment, “ten times worse than the surgery,” all but destroyed his salivary glands, causing a whole host of new problems. He wakes up every half hour at night to drink water, has difficulty eating, and his mouth dries out quickly when he speaks. He needs highly specialized dental care even to get his teeth cleaned.



“What we’re looking at right now are treatments that would prevent this from happening in other patients,” says Dr. Jana Rieger, a professor of speech pathology and audiology in the U of A’s Faculty of Rehabilitation Medicine.

Rieger is part of a team based at the Misericordia Hospital – called the Craniofacial Osseointegration and Maxillofacial Prosthetic Rehabilitation Unit (COMPRU) – investigating two promising forms of treatment to prevent saliva loss. One involves relocating the salivary glands from the side/rear of the jaw to just under the chin, where they escape the damaging beam of radiation treatment. The other is a drug called Saligen, which stimulates saliva production but

may also have a role in protecting cells in the salivary glands from the effects of radiation.

Rieger’s role in the comparative study, now in phase three and funded by the Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research (AHFMR), is to monitor patients’ progress after treatment to determine which approach works better. She also designs oral prosthetic devices that help recovering patients speak and eat with greater ease.

“We’re trying to figure out what works better so we can continue to give them a better quality of life,” she says. “What I’m trying to understand is how (the loss of saliva) affects peoples’ swallowing and chewing. Besides the sleeping issues, these are the things that destroy their quality of life... they have difficulty going out and socializing with friends over a meal at someone’s house, and it takes them twice as long to eat,” says Rieger.

People who have lost saliva often don’t eat as much as they should, she says, and begin to acquire problems associated with poor nutrition, such as bone and joint deterioration.

Many with jobs that require speaking – teachers for instance – have been forced to quit because of the discomfort.

“People don’t realize the social impact of having a dry mouth,” she says. Many studies have been done documenting the physical effects of saliva loss, but what’s different about this one is that it takes into account “what it actually does to the patient... What does this mean for the patient and their life? How does this affect you as a social being?”

“That’s what is unique about what we’re doing here, and it’s not being done in any of these other international centres. So in that respect we truly are, here in Edmonton, leaders in this field.”

COMPRU is considered an internationally recognized centre of excellence for head and neck reconstruction. According to AHFMR, head and neck cancers account for four to five per cent of all cancers. Each year 300 Albertans are diagnosed with cancers of the head and neck.

As for Csorba, Saligen treatment failed to work in his case, but he is still managing to live a full, satisfying life. He says he’s in the best shape ever, working out five or six days a week, coaching and playing soccer seven days a week. An accomplished artist, he sells paintings, many of them documenting his cancer experience, and says painting is by far “the best drug” he’s found.

He may have to drink 50 or 60 glasses of water a day, but he’s happy just to be alive. “I feel good – I play soccer with 21-year-olds and kick their butts, and I’m 40. It’s kind of like the Lance Armstrong thing – I have no fear of going all out.”

