

Unorthodox treatment struggles for mainstream acceptance

Hyperbaric Oxygen Clinic partners with UC Davis MIND Institute to study how high levels of oxygen could affect children with disorders like autism

KATHY ROBERTSON | STAFF WRITER

A small Sacramento clinic with a big dream is struggling to survive in a health-care industry that doesn't look kindly on new uses of old treatments.

Hyperbaric Oxygen Clinic of Sacramento offers treatment for a wide variety of medical conditions, some paid for by insurance, some not.

Started four years ago, the clinic treats from six to 11 patients a day. Most treatments are word of mouth as the founder struggles to break through bias, get the message out and prompt the kind of scientific studies that could chinch its future.

Hyperbaric oxygen has been used for decades for wound care, diving-related illnesses and to treat smoke inhalation. The procedure raises the oxygen level in the blood stream many times above normal in order to arouse the cells and promote healing.

Some medical experts think it can help patients with severe brain injuries, too. Many others, including most insurers, dispute that notion, citing a lack of scientific evidence.

Clinic founder Ed Nemeth's daughter, Rebecca, has severe cerebral palsy, her muscle coordination impaired by 35 minutes without oxygen at birth. Repeated doses of 100 percent oxygen have improved her movements and ability to live and act normally. Now 12, she attends regular school when she can.

Nemeth's dream is to make hyperbaric treatment accessible to patients with cerebral palsy, autism and brain injuries — and have it paid for by insurance.

A new pilot study, a joint effort between the clinic and the UC Davis MIND Institute, could begin to change the picture.

A TREATMENT FOR AUTISM?

The study, slated to start within weeks, includes 10 children with autism who will get 80 sessions of hyperbaric oxygen therapy at the clinic.

Doctors at the MIND Institute will evaluate the children and analyze the data, executive director Dr. Bob Hendren said.

Autism is a severe developmental disorder that is largely misunderstood. It affects as many as 1.5 million Americans and their families and costs the United States at least \$35 billion annually, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta.

The MIND Institute opened on the UC Davis campus in July 2003. Its goal is to identify the causes of neurological

disorders such as autism and develop better treatments.

The pilot study, expected to cost about \$120,000 and be completed in less than a year, will track what hyperbaric oxygen treatment does for kids with autism.

Hyperbaric oxygen treatment helps with inflammation, which may affect some autistic children. The study will look for biological markers and measure the change after treatment.

It's worth a study.

If it's negative, it may help parents make some decisions.

If it's positive?

We're looking for anything to help children.

Dr. Bob Hendren
executive director, MIND Institute

Hendren said, "At that point, we didn't think the evidence was conclusive. Some parents who founded the MIND Institute have tried hyperbaric oxygen treatment and say it's made a real difference in their children. There's been a difference of opinion, even here. That's why we're starting with 10."

A LAWSUIT

A bigger fight continues with Alta California Regional Center, one of 21 centers in the state that provides government-sponsored services to assist people with developmental disabilities.

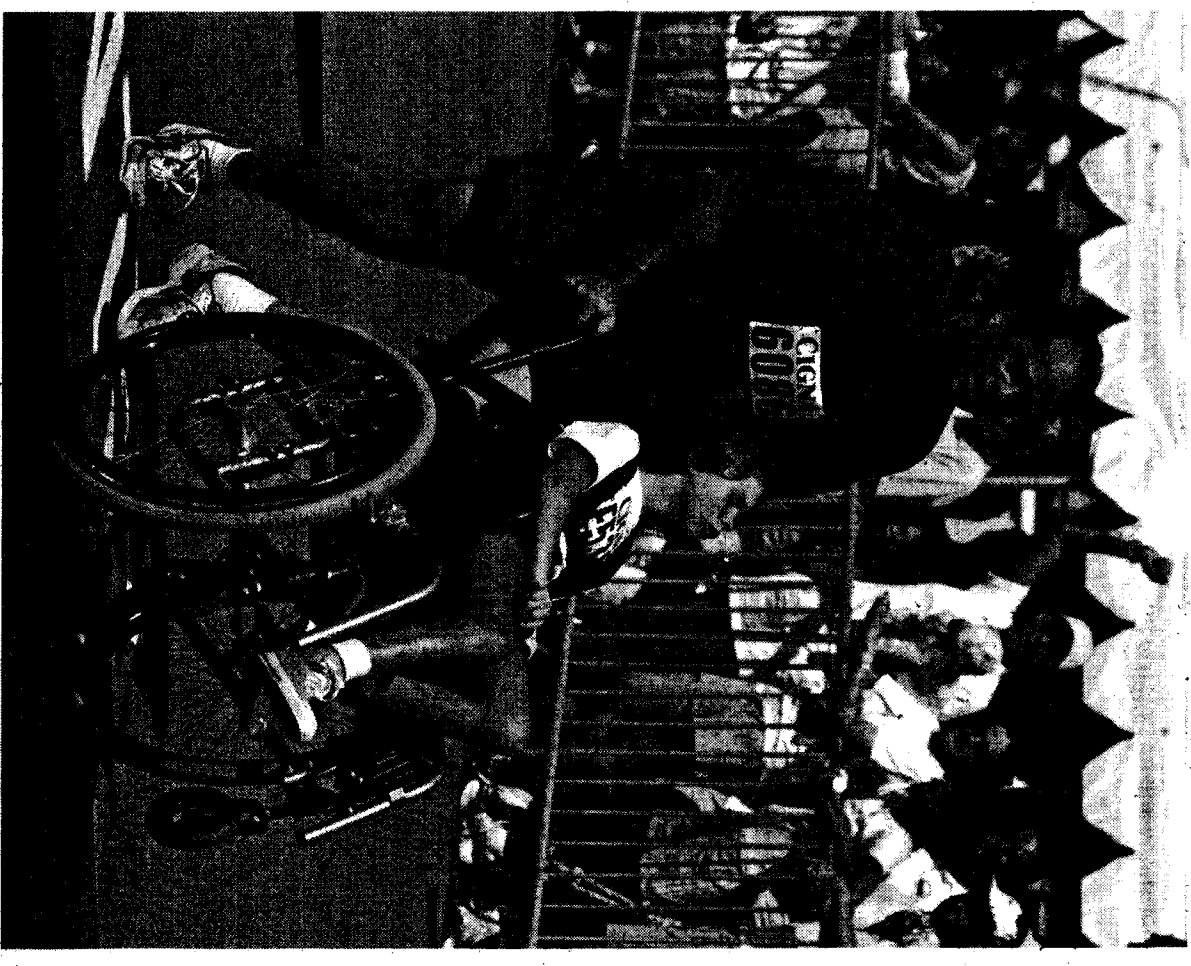
Nemeth petitioned Alta California to pay for 10 hyperbaric treatments for his daughter. The organization refused. The dispute is now being litigated.

"They just didn't want to do it, and they hired an expensive Beverly Hills lawyer to fight it," Nemeth said. A final hearing will be held next week.

'They just didn't want to do it and they hired an expensive Beverly Hills lawyer to fight it.'

Ed Nemeth
founder, Hyperbaric Oxygen Clinic

Controversy over the proposed treatment has been tough. "They first came to us four or five years ago," Hendren said. "They first came to us four or five years ago," Hendren said. "They first came to us four or five years ago," Hendren said.



Ed and Rebecca Nemeth raised \$9,000 for the CHERISH Foundation in a race held Aug. 2 in Fallmouth, Mass.

Phil Bonnet, executive director at Alta California, said he could not talk about a specific case involving a client, especially one in litigation.

"But in terms of hyperbaric oxygen treatment in general, our regional center — like every other of the 21 regional centers in the state — views the treatment as experimental and unproven with regard to treatment of developmental disabilities," he said.

FOUNDATION PAYS THE WAY

Meanwhile, the clinic continues to provide treatments — approved and paid for by insurance companies or unapproved and paid for by parents.

They last an hour or two and cost anywhere from \$100 to \$240, said Mike Greenhalgh, who came on board as a mentor after his daughter Jessica suffered an abdominal injury 20 months ago that stopped her heart and put her into a vegetative state for eight months.

"After a large number of treatments, she is alert, still quadriplegic, but spoke her first sentence three months ago," he said. Nemeth started the CHERISH Foundation three years ago to help patients who seek treatment but can't get it covered or pay for it themselves. The organization has raised and paid \$9,000 this year.

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