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Pastor counts new stroke therapy a blessing

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Staff Writer

The Rev. Lacy Oliver reached out his left hand, grasped a large foam ball, and released it into a waiting bin. His wife Mary wiped a steady flow of tears from her eyes, whispering a prayer of thanks.

It's been 14 years since Oliver suffered a stroke that partially paralyzed his left arm, shoulder and hand.

It's been just two months since Oliver, with the help of Lenoir Memorial Hospital Kesha Smith, regained use of his crippled left hand.

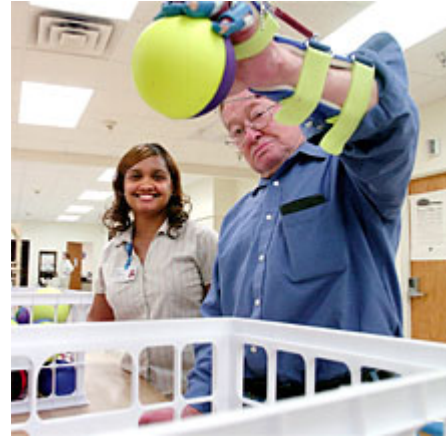
The miracle, the Oliver's say, is due in part to a new device Oliver has used to teach his left hand how to grip and release again. "Kesha called me and asked me if I would be her guinea pig, and I said I would," Oliver said.

He is the first stroke patient at LMH to use a new therapeutic device, Saeboflex, that teaches hand muscles how to respond in a grip-and-release motion. Developed by two Morehead City rehabilitation therapists, Smith was certified in February to use the device. Just a week later, Oliver began therapy. "He's one of my star patients," Smith said. "He's done so well that he's now on a once-weekly maintenance program."

The results Oliver experienced with Saeboflex were uncanny. After the first therapy, he was fitted with a custom-tailored Saeboflex. Six sessions later, Oliver was using a hand that had, for 14 years, been clenched in a fist from the after-effects of the stroke. "It's the first time since I had my stroke that I've been able to pick something up with this hand," Oliver said.

Mary Oliver wept happily as he demonstrated his restored skills. "He has worked so hard, and I'm so very proud of him," she said. Saeboflex therapy is revolutionary for patients who have had little or no hand function. The spring tension in the device fits over the hand, wrist and lower arm and helps the debilitated muscle learn to recognize movement again. Then, with regular therapy, patients are able to pick up objects, hold them and release them.

"He can do everyday self-care tasks, from picking up a water bottle or opening a jar or just tucking in his shirt," Smith said. "His left hand has learned how to assist his right hand." Patients using Saeboflex are custom-fitted and take the device home to continue therapy when their regular sessions are discontinued, Smith said. Periodic checkups with a therapist keep the patient on track and motivated to continue using it as a strengthening and toning tool.



Charles Buchanan/Free Press

The Rev. Lacy Oliver demonstrates his newfound ability to hold and release objects with his stroke-afflicted left hand using the Saeboflex device. Occupational Therapist Leshka Smith's pleasure with Oliver's progress is evident.

For Oliver, he is now on a schedule that will only require him to return for monthly checkups. Saeboflex therapy is most appropriate for stroke patients who already have shoulder and elbow movement, Smith said. The movement doesn't have to be dramatic, she said.

Oliver continues his pastoring responsibilities at Union Baptist Church, even though he retired after 55 years, first at Spillman Baptist Church, then Rivermonth Baptist Church. He was back in the pulpit just 3 ½ months after his stroke in 1991.

Regaining use of his left hand reminds him each day that he is part of what he considers a miracle. "It's a blessing, if you really think about it," Oliver said. "If you have a stroke on your left side, you can still speak. I had the stroke, but it left me able to speak. Now, I'm also able to use my left hand again. What a blessing."

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