

Steady as He Goes

Deep brain stimulation flips the switch on tremors.

At first, Mike Brodlieb could tolerate the minor trembling in his left hand. But after several years, the neurological condition that caused his symptoms, called essential tremor, worsened. Eating was difficult, and enjoying his morning coffee or lunchtime bowl of soup was frustrating, if not impossible. Something had to be done.

"It affected my entire body," says Brodlieb, a 78-year-old San Juan Capistrano resident and retired cruise consultant. "Even my head was flinching back and forth."

Brodlieb's neurologist, Joey R. Gee, DO, suggested he consult with Alexander Taghva, MD, a board-certified neurosurgeon with specialized fellowship training in deep brain stimulation, or DBS. After Brodlieb learned he was a good candidate for DBS, he decided to go for it. And now, thanks to Dr. Taghva, his extraordinary neurological team and the leading-edge DBS technology available at Providence Mission Hospital, Brodlieb is enjoying life again.

"It was amazing," says Brodlieb. "The effect was immediate. I had 95% less shaking than I did before."

Brodlieb lives with his son, Stuart, who vividly remembers his father's thrill when the tremors stopped. "He was thanking everyone profusely when he left the hospital. It was wonderful to see him so happy," he says.

DBS is akin to a "brain pacemaker" that can control tremors. The treatment involves two separate procedures. In the first, a small incision is made in the scalp and, using image guidance, the surgeon inserts thin wire leads, or electrodes, in targeted areas. The patient is usually awake and sedated as a low level of electrical current is passed through the electrode. The surgical team can then assess the current's effect on the patient's symptoms and make any necessary modifications. In some cases, this first-stage surgery can be performed with patients fully asleep.

In the second surgery, performed one to two weeks later under general anesthesia, an insulated wire is attached to the electrode's lead and surgically guided to a battery. This battery is implanted under the patient's skin below the collarbone. About two weeks later, the patient visits the doctor to have the electrodes programmed through a device similar to a TV remote.

According to Dr. Taghva, DBS is most commonly used to treat essential tremor and symptoms of

Parkinson's disease. "For essential tremor, average relief is upwards of 70% to 80%, and in Parkinson's the typical motor improvement score is over 50%, with up to 80% improvement in tremor," he says. He has also successfully used DBS to treat patients with epilepsy, dystonia, obsessive-compulsive disorder and Tourette's syndrome.

"It's very fulfilling for me, and those in my specialty, to be able to help patients who have had a chronic condition for a long time," says Dr. Taghva. "With the flip of a switch, we can give them their lives back."

Our neurological team at Providence Mission, including Ronak R. Vora, DO, a neurologist with specialized training in movement disorders, has extensive experience with DBS technology, resulting in many positive outcomes.

Recent technology now enables some of our patients to be under general anesthesia for the initial surgery. "Within the last five years, we've seen a lot of innovations in the market, primarily with asleep placement with image guidance and directional stimulation," says Dr. Taghva. "We have intraoperative CT scans that enable us to ensure that the electrodes are exactly in the right place. So we have the whole package here."

Brodlieb was certainly impressed. "Dr. Taghva, his team and the nursing staff were excellent," he says. "I've been to many hospitals, and this one stood out." Today, Brodlieb is glad to be at home with his son and his three beloved cats: Moose, a pixie bobcat, Oliver, a British longhair, and Gizmo, a black-and-gray rescue.

But he'll never forget that first day home. "I had chicken tortilla soup for lunch," says Brodlieb. "And without spilling a drop. I was so happy I was crying afterwards."

Later that evening, in celebration of his new, tremor-free life, Brodlieb and his son celebrated by ordering Chinese takeout, a longtime tradition.

And to Stuart's surprise, his father—who had taught him to use chopsticks decades earlier—was now nimbly using them to eat his dinner. ●

For more information on deep brain stimulation and treatment of neurological disorders, call 844-943-1060.