



News

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Brain surgery changes broker's outlook on advice

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Forty-one years after he enlisted in the Army during the Vietnam era, Hunter Smith sports the same haircut — this time after surgery to implant electrodes and a brain pacemaker that have alleviated tremors of Parkinson's disease that plagued the 61-year-old Charleston stockbroker. He says the procedure brought him "peace at last."



Smith refers to this monitor as his garage door opener — it controls his brain pacemaker and lets him know if it has proper battery power. In the background is an article from the Cleveland Plain Dealer about President George Bush's visit to the Cleveland Clinic, where he met Dr. Ali Rezai, who installed Smith's device.



Dr. Ali Rezai, a neurologist for the Cleveland Clinic who specializes in electrical stimulation devices in the brains of patients suffering from disorders such as Parkinson's disease, explains his work during a Bush visit in July — the same day Smith was back at the clinic to have his own device activated.

The day Hunter Smith's life changed for the better, he was wide-awake in a surgical suite while a team of doctors poked around in his brain.

Led by Cleveland Clinic neurologist Ali Rezai, the doctors were placing electrodes into the region of Smith's brain that was misfiring, causing the troubling effects of Parkinson's disease.

The 61-year-old Charleston stockbroker was awake because doctors needed to test his responses. They asked him to tap his fingers together. They watched the movement of his tongue.

"Then they hit the sweet spot," he said, recalling the day, June 12.

"I said, 'This is better than a walk on the moon.' And then I started to cry -- because it was the first time in seven years that I didn't shake."

Truth be told, 2000 was an all-around bad year for Smith.

A long-time financial services provider for Smith Barney, he also had a second career in the military, first as a young enlisted man who served in the Army in Vietnam and later as an Army national guardsman who was a lieutenant colonel and head of his battalion when he retired.

He was successful, confident, fit and in charge of his life.

The day before he and his wife, Robin, and their children, Alexa and Adam, were to leave for vacation in May 2000, he had a routine colonoscopy. It showed he had a tumor and it was cancerous. He would require surgery and chemotherapy.

During a bedside visit after surgery, Dr. Eric Mantz asked Smith, "Why is your left leg shaking?"

"I hadn't even noticed," Smith recalled.

A visit to neurologist Glenn Goldfarb ruled out a brain tumor but confirmed something just as bad.

Smith had Parkinson's disease.

So while he was dealing with cancer treatment and complications from chemotherapy, Smith also had to face a second disease, one with no cure.

"Parkinson's doesn't kill you. It just makes your life miserable," Smith said.

The disease affects nerve cells in the part of the brain that controls muscle movement. Its early symptoms might include slight trembling. As it progresses, it can cause balance problems, muscle rigidity and slowed movements. It eventually can be disabling.

Many are familiar with the ravages of the disease on boxer Mohammed Ali or actor Michael J. Fox.

Smith attacked both diseases with his two best defenses -- knowledge and attitude.

"Attitude is what gets you through," he said.

Under the care of oncologist Steven Jubelirer, he made it through the misery of chemotherapy. His yearly checkups since have proved him to be cured.

He began attending a local Parkinson's support group, where he met men like Nolan Parsons, a dermatologist, and businessman Ken Shaw.

He started on a drug regimen that worked at first. Parkinson's medications are like that -- they work well during a honeymoon period and then must be adjusted.

The disease affected only the left side of his body, causing his hand to shake. His left foot dragged.

"I'd stand up and I'd trip on the carpet and I'd look stupid," he said. "I'd go to a gathering after work and I couldn't hold a glass. I would slur my words. My speech became monotone."

The combination of medications constantly had to be adjusted.

"I told Dr. Goldfarb, 'You're like the bartender trying to fix the perfect drink for the alcoholic who doesn't know what he wants.' "

Through his research, Smith was familiar with surgery to treat tremor disorders, deep brain stimulators or brain pacemakers, essentially. Parsons and Shaw both had the surgery at the Cleveland Clinic with Dr. Ali Rezai.

As his medications became less effective and their complications worse, Smith began considering more drastic steps. One medication caused his voice to disappear by the end of the day. Another muddled his thinking.

The turning point occurred one day when he was driving on the West Virginia Turnpike.

"There were people in the car with me. Only I was alone," he said.

Although brain pacemaker surgery is available in Charleston, Smith wanted to be treated by Rezai because he was impressed with his longtime expertise.

Smith headed to Cleveland to meet Rezai, who wanted to make sure Smith understood what could go wrong, including brain hemorrhage and infection.

"He asked me if I knew what the risks were. I said, 'Yes, you can screw up.' "

"But I said I'm doing it the Henry Ford way," Smith said. The legendary car manufacturer was known to surround himself with experts in areas such as production and to trust their expertise.

"I said, 'You're the brain guy.'"

The surgery requires patients to be awake during part of it and under general anesthesia for the next.

Electrodes threaded to the part of the brain affected by Parkinson's are attached to connecting wires that run under a patient's skin from his skull to an area by his collarbone, where a battery-operated pacemaker about the size of a deck of cards is installed. The pacemaker sends electric impulses to those areas of the brain that stop the tremors.

Once doctors found the "sweet spot" that stopped Smith's tremors, he was put to sleep so they could install the electrodes. Later, the pacemaker was installed in a separate surgery near his collarbone. He never felt enough pain after either procedure to need even an aspirin.

After about a week in Cleveland, Smith went home for a month, during which the electrodes and pacemaker "settled" into place; they were not activated and he resumed life with his medications.

In July, he returned to be "turned on and tuned up," interestingly on the same day that President George Bush toured the clinic, met Rezai and learned about procedures like this.

Smith wishes he had known -- he would have liked to press the president about stem cell research, supported by Republican Congresswoman Shelley Moore Capito. In Cleveland, Smith gladly participated in a National Institutes for Health study about brain stimulation surgery.

"Anything for the advancement of science," he said.

Smith still takes some of his medications. He must avoid certain medical procedures such as MRIs and cannot go through airport or store security devices because of their strong magnetic fields. He'll have to be monitored regularly and have the pacemaker's batteries replaced every three to five years.

He will avoid rigorous activities that might cause him to bang his head. He doesn't know how long the device will be effective for his symptoms.

But Smith has no tremors. He no longer trips on the carpet. His voice is strong. He no longer needs nine hours of sleep a night.

"You don't want one of these things. But if you need one, it's a great thing," he said. If he'd known how well the \$150,000 procedure would work, he'd have done it earlier.

"I got up at a quarter to 6 this morning and walked two laps around Edgewood Summit (from his home nearby on the West Side)," he said.

And he recently took up croquet, of all things, a sport that requires finesse and strategy he now finds especially appealing.

His experiences with both colon cancer and Parkinson's have made Smith a bit of an evangelist with information.

When he was diagnosed with cancer, he sent letters to his clients, explaining his situation.

"I was inundated with card, letters, e-mails and phone calls," he said.

More than a dozen people scheduled colonoscopies because of his experience. Several had tumors or polyps discovered early.

"That's the way I feel about this," he said.

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