

BUFFALO
BUSINESS FIRST
WESTERN NEW YORK'S BUSINESS NEWSPAPER

Friday, June 12, 2009

An option with heart

Heart and vascular patients aided by 'counterpulsation'

Business First of Buffalo - by [Tracey Drury](#)



Jim Courtney

VascuFlo owner Aaron Hirsch preps his father, Allen for external counterpulsation.

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Aaron Hirsch's father was not a well man. Diagnosed with severe heart disease, he had undergone surgery for a bypass and had seven stents placed, but his heart was still failing.

Doctors at the **Cleveland Clinic** rejected him for surgery, telling the 44-year-old he was too high-risk. But they did recommend a procedure called external counterpulsation, a non-invasive treatment that stimulates the heart. But he would have to drive from his Western New York home to Rochester more than 30 times over the course of a year to receive the treatment.

It worked: In the 10-plus years since, Hirsch's father has not been rehospitalized even once.

Hirsch, a pharmacist, says it was during one of those drives to and from treatment with his father that he became determined to bring external counterpulsation to Buffalo.

"It's a great option for patients with heart disease. Unfortunately, it's known as a last-resort treatment option. We're trying to slowly change that and give people an option," Hirsch says.

Who's who: Aaron Hirsch, president & CEO; Kerrie Hirsch, human resources manager; Dr. Leon Levinsky, medical director and cardiothoracic surgeon; Dr. Ranjan Bhayana, medical director and cardiologist; and Dr. Michael Mehrige, medical director and cardiologist. Total employment is 11.

What's going on: VascuFlo provides external counterpulsation, a non-invasive treatment for heart and vascular patients. It is the only independent clinic in the eight-county Western New York region offering the procedure.

Approved by the FDA in 1995 as a treatment for heart disease, the **American Heart Association** says the procedure improves the balance between the amount of oxygen the heart needs and the amount it gets. The treatment provides relief of angina, shortness of breath and fatigue.

Patients are fitted with pressure cuffs on their legs, which are inflated in sequences. This compresses the blood vessels in the legs and forces it back up to the heart. The treatment is covered by all local insurance providers and is most often used on patients who are unwilling or unable to go through an invasive procedure, or for whom such surgeries have failed.

History: Hirsch opened VascuFlo in Amherst in 2002, placing his first one-bed system inside the cardiology offices of Dr. Mehrige. Hirsch financed the business with help from an **M&T Bank** small business loan. A second system followed, housed in the Niagara Falls cardiology offices of Dr. Bhayana.

The third site opened with three systems in Cheektowaga under the direction of Dr. Levinsky, a cardiothoracic surgeon and director of Kaleida's cardiac device clinic at **Buffalo General Hospital**. Next came a site in Lake Shore for Southtowns patients, followed by a major expansion at the Cheektowaga site this spring. The company now occupies about 6,600 square feet at the Walden Avenue site.

Today, VascuFlo operates 15 external counterpulsation systems at the five sites with capacity to treat up to 80 patients per day. That includes a mobile unit currently housed in Conewango Valley near Pennsylvania.

Levinsky, a surgeon for nearly 45 years, says the procedure accomplishes the same goal as surgically inserting balloon in a patient's aorta – but without the cost and risk associated with surgery.

“We have doctors who don't know anything about this and cardiologists who don't believe in it, but we try to get the message across,” says Levinsky, who lectures across the region about the procedure and spreads awareness while on rounds in area hospitals.

“We know that stenting does not prolong the patient's life in most cases. It does relieve symptoms, but it does not prolong the patient's life. We feel we have a place.”

Revenues: The company expects to see revenues this year of \$1.5 million, up from \$1 million last year. For 2010, Hirsch projects revenues of \$3 million with the addition of cardiac rehab and VascuScript.

What's next: VascuFlo will begin offering cardiac rehabilitation services this summer, helping to fill a growing need in the region. The **Catholic Health System** shut down its Mercy Ambulatory Center (MAC) this year, while Buffalo General Hospital closed its cardiac rehab unit a few years ago.

Rehab is an integral part of the post-surgical process, and is typically covered by insurance for about seven week post-op. VascuFlo plans to offer a maintenance program as well for those who wish to pay out-of-pocket for continuing rehab. Plans call for hiring two exercise physiologists initially for the facility, along with a chiropractor and acupuncturist.

Another related business set to open this July at the VascuFlo Center is VascuScript, an on-site, hybrid pharmacy that will offer free delivery and mail-order business, as well as retail pharmacy business. Hirsch, a 1994 **University at Buffalo** School of Pharmacy graduate, is partnering with two classmates on that venture: Ken Andrus; and Dean Trzewieczynski, who serves as president.

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