

**Doctor Embarks on Parkinson's Research**  
**By Caryn Rousseau, The Washington Post**  
**The Associated Press**

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LITTLE ROCK - Searching for a treatment for her Parkinson's disease, Anne James found it nearly 2,500 miles from her Vancouver home. Anne and her husband Ron James found Arkansas cardiologist Dr. Charles Fitzgerald, who inadvertently found a way to ease Parkinson's symptoms using an Enhanced External Counterpulsation machine.

Anne, 67, couldn't comb her own hair. Now she can. She loved to play the piano. Now she taps away and sings along. Smelling a flower was difficult. Not anymore.

"When I went down there I was dragging my left foot," Anne said. "Not anymore. My sense of smell improved."

The progress began two years ago, and she says she is still benefiting from Fitzgerald's therapy without an increase in medication. Fitzgerald is on to something, her husband says.

"He has something with that machine," Ron James said. "There is something that that machine does and it needs to be researched immediately."

That's Fitzgerald's plan. He said he's talking with doctors across the country and hopes to set up a study on how a machine used to treat patients with angina and heart blockage could possibly help others with Parkinson's.

"We can say this improves the quality of life for people with Parkinson's," Fitzgerald said. "That's a definite. Does it cure Parkinson's? We don't know."

Other doctors and the Michael J. Fox Foundation For Parkinson's Research declined comment on Fitzgerald's work. Most preferred to wait until scientific studies are completed.

The machine Fitzgerald uses looks daunting, almost like it should be in an experimental lab. It makes a loud thumping noise.

Patients strap blood pressure cuff-like covers around their legs and up to their hips. Hoses pump air in succession into the cuffs, which push blood out of the legs and up to their hearts, improving circulation. The pulses go along with the heart rate as a patient lays on a bed, reading or watching television.

"The legs don't need the blood flow right away, why not send it to the heart where people have pain?" Fitzgerald said.

For now, the FDA has approved the machine's use for chest pain and congestive heart failure, but Fitzgerald said it could help with an array of problems. The benefits for Parkinson's came to his attention when he treated a patient who suffered from the disease along with heart problems.

The patient was standing on the treadmill for his usual stress test when he mentioned the improvement to Fitzgerald.

"He holds out his hand and he said, 'Look, I'm not shaking anymore,'" Fitzgerald said, holding out his own hand very steadily. "That was exactly how it happened. It was pure serendipity. I had to have a patient slap me in the face with it."

The normal treatment for heart patients calls for 35 one-hour sessions on the machine five times a week for seven weeks. But Fitzgerald noticed that he had times when a few of his machines were vacant. So he started offering those slots at no charge to any Parkinson's patients who wanted the experimental treatment. So far 27 people have taken him up on the deal. The Jameses made the trip from Canada. Another patient came from New Mexico. Others have come from all across Arkansas.

Fitzgerald says that most showed marked improvement. Their tremors are diminished, they have better balance when they walk and their facial expressions are improved.

But a formal study is necessary because more questions remain, the doctor said.

"We don't know if you keep treating patients if their Parkinson's will go away," Fitzgerald said.

The doctor said that besides Parkinson's, the machine can be used for macular degeneration and pulmonary hypertension. He wants the FDA to approve use of the machine to treat any condition that there is published proof it can help.

The FDA approval would make the treatment eligible for Medicaid and insurance coverage, giving more patients access.

No one knows how the machine seems to help those with Parkinson's but Fitzgerald has a theory. He said that those with the disease, like Muhammad Ali, have a history of head trauma.

"Could that not have upset the part of the brain that releases dopamine?" Fitzgerald said.

Dopamine helps regulate movement.

"So the (machine) would work by improving blood flow in that part of the brain," he said.

Others report a boost in energy after they've had a treatment. Glenden Belew, 77, of Conway, taps his fingers as he listens to Gene Autry songs during his sessions. The

retired welder, who sometimes suffers from chest pain, said he could tell the difference right away.

He motions to his wife, sitting in a chair at the foot of his bed, waiting for him to finish.

"She's seen the changes in me," he said.

Dorothy Belew said he feels better in the days after a treatment and she's excited to hear that it may be preventing other conditions as well.

"I don't think he would still be here if he hadn't taken this treatment," she said.

Ron James says that he's seen some pretty amazing things come off the machine. He said the couple traveled so far, stayed in a hotel for five weeks and rented a car, because Dr. Fitzgerald offered and there aren't any machines in western Canada.

"He didn't charge us a cent," James said. "That man was a real saint. I'm not saying it's a cure, but it needs research."

This article can be found at:

<http://www.globalaging.org/health/us/2004/ParkinsonResearch.htm>