

## Stoneham firefighter praises benefits of oxygen therapy

By Kristin Erikson/Special to the Sun

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Stoneham — Stoneham firefighter Eric Bernat believes there is an alternative way to effectively treat life-long ailments – from autism to arthritis, to cerebral palsy and chronic fatigue syndrome.

He sees mini-miracles happen before his eyes everyday as the co-owner of H.O.P.E. (Hyperbaric Oxygen for Physical Excellence) Connections Inc., a privately owned clinic in North Reading that provides hyperbaric oxygen therapy.

At H.O.P.E. Connections, Bernat has seen stroke victims improve their speech and children with autism expand their vocabulary. Patients reached these milestones simply by breathing in pure oxygen in a highly pressurized environment.

“I first learned about hyperbaric oxygen therapy when I was doing research on alternative treatments for rheumatoid arthritis,” said Bernat, who works three days a week as an exercise physiologist at a local retirement community. “Many of my clients complain of constant aching joints and I wanted to find a way to alleviate their pain.”

Through his research on the Internet, Bernat learned that hyperbaric oxygen therapy could help with rheumatoid arthritis, as it stimulates a variety of positive reactions within the human body, including promoting the growth of new blood vessels, decreasing swelling and inflammation, and improving the rate of healing.

During hyperbaric oxygen therapy, patients enter into a large capsule-like structure where they must don headwear necessary for their “dive.” While breathing in pure oxygen through the headwear, the pressure in the chamber is brought down, as if you were diving underwater. Patients typically are in a chamber for an hour and a half, according to Bernat.

Earlier this year, Bernat began to look into purchasing a portable hyperbaric chamber of his own until he stumbled upon a Craigslist advertisement seeking business partners for the H.O.P.E. Connection. He immediately met with the owners of the facility, two families who partnered in 2007 after purchasing their own chambers to treat their children. Bernat joined them as a business partner this past June.

“There are so many different studies that have been done about the effectiveness of hyperbaric oxygen therapy and I decided to get involved because I wanted people to know about it,” Bernat said.

While not fully supported by all physicians, hyperbaric oxygen therapy is becoming more widely accepted in the medical field. Allegan General Hospital in Allegan, Mich., recently announced that

they are planning to open a new wound healing center in 2010, which will include hyperbaric oxygen therapy chambers.

In a 2008 article in the publication *Wound Care Canada*, registered nurse Martine Albert writes that “hyperbaric oxygen therapy has been used to assist in wound healing for over 40 years” and was used originally used to treat decompression sickness.

In the 1950s and 1960s, hyperbaric oxygen therapy was used to treat gas poisoning, carbon monoxide poisoning, gangrene, and other anemic states, and showed a good response, according to Albert. “As a firefighter, if a fire happened, we would meet them right here at H.O.P.E. Connections and get them into the chamber to help them out,” said Bernat, adding that the clinic is currently serving approximately 15 patients.

Bernat’s mother, Susan, a Stoneham resident, has decided to try hyperbaric chamber therapy for herself after the New Year. She suffers from neck and lower back pain due to arthritis in her spine.

What inspired her to try the therapy, which costs \$150 per session and may be covered by insurance, was a recent episode of “Mercy” on NBC. The main character on the show, a nurse, suggested a patient try hyperbaric chamber therapy to treat his burns.

“People seem to be really happy with the results,” Susan said. “I’ve tried everything from cortisone shots to physical therapy. So I figured why not give this a shot.”

Bernat told the *Sun* that he and his staff at H.O.P.E. Connections are committed to “working 24/7 for whoever needs it” – no matter how big or how small the ailment may be.

“This was a cause definitely worth getting involved in,” Bernat said. “There’s nothing more worthwhile than seeing people get better.”

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