

April 26, 2008 - Pain Clinic Aids Soldiers, Civilians

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BY DR. WILLIAM FRITZ

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On April 18, U.S. Rep. John Murtha dedicated the Regional Anesthesia and Acute Pain Medicine Clinic at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

The six-bed clinic will care for nearly one-third of the combat casualties that pass through Walter Reed. With state-of-the-art ultrasound imaging, real-time electronic medical record keeping and advanced training capabilities, it is a world-class facility that few academic medical centers possess.

Even before the current conflict in Iraq, Murtha was one of the earliest supporters of applying the most advanced nerve-blocking pain-control techniques for the military. After the war began in 2003, he saw firsthand at Walter Reed the positive effect that adequate pain control had on the care and morale of horribly injured soldiers.

Murtha became an active proponent for the creation of the Army Regional Anesthesia and Pain Management Initiative, a collaborative research partnership between Walter Reed and Conemaugh Health System to improve the quality of pain management for the military and civilians.

The war in Iraq is a new and different war. Due to better body armor, soldiers now survive attacks and explosions that would have been fatal to their predecessors. Combined with the increased use of air evacuation and advanced medical technology, 90 percent of wounded soldiers now survive.

Medically speaking, this conflict has become a war on extremities. The pain associated with many of these blasted and traumatized limbs is excruciating. The challenge is how to best address the suffering of these patients.

The application of advanced nerve-blocking pain-management catheters for battlefield injuries first occurred in October 2003 when an Army convoy outside Baghdad was attacked by rocket-propelled grenades. Spc. Brian Wilhelm, a 21-year-old Iowa farm boy, had his left calf blown away, leaving his foot connected to his body only by exposed bone and a mass of pulp-like flesh.

A doctor, Lt. Col. Chester "Trip" Buckenmaier III, used continuous peripheral nerve-blocking catheters to relieve Wilhelm's pain. From the moment his first operation was completed at Camp Anaconda in Iraq to the procedures performed back home at Walter Reed, Wilhelm was pain-free.

Slowly, from that point on, the treatment of wounded soldiers in severe pain began to change in the military.

Wilhelm is an example of what is possible with the early treatment of pain. Fifteen days after being wounded, his left leg was amputated below the knee. He started rehabilitation almost immediately and never suffered any significant phantom limb pain, the bane of amputees.

Wilhelm subsequently returned to active duty and retired as a sergeant. Never yielding to his disability, in 2007 he placed fourth in the discus at the U.S. Paralympic Championships in Atlanta.

Wilhelm shared the podium with Murtha as they proudly announced the opening of the Acute Pain Medicine Clinic at Walter Reed. Both appreciate the profound impact this clinic will have on the care of American soldiers.

Murtha saw and experienced the horrors of war firsthand in Vietnam. As a consistent, unobtrusive and caring visitor to the bedsides of the wounded, he is committed to ensuring that America honors its obligation to care for and ease the pain of those who have been hurt serving in harm's way. He also is dedicated to making these medical advancements available to citizens at home.

Murtha's efforts have enabled soldiers — and patients in the Conemaugh Health System — to have possibly the best care for their pain that is available at this time.

As Murtha explained: "The earlier you treat the pain, the sooner you start the rehabilitation."

In my opinion, the opening of the Regional Anesthesia and Acute Pain Medicine Clinic at Water Reed is the most recent manifestation of Murtha's relentless effort to improve the care for — and honor the sacrifices of — our American soldiers.

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