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Therapists focus on breathing

By Heidi Rowley

Physical therapy patients are seeing a dramatic increase in recovery times due to a relatively new form of therapy offered at Turlock Nursing and Rehabilitation Center.

Eight months ago, the nursing home started offering pulmonary rehabilitation in conjunction with physical therapy. Therapists said that some patients have a difficult time doing physical therapy after surgery or illness because of shortness of breath and exhaustion.

"If they're on oxygen, their activity time is less and recovery time is longer," said physical therapist Mike Zinke. He said that some patients recovery time has been shortened once they received pulmonary rehabilitation. "There has been a dramatic improvement," Zinke said.

Respiratory therapist Belinda Spradling said that patients are target for pulmonary rehabilitation if they are continuously receiving oxygen or have chronic breathing problems. She helps them focus on their breathing and they do exercises that help them breathe regularly.

She said many patients have been able to give up their oxygen machines because of the techniques they have learned. Spradling said she helps patients learn not to hyperventilate and to breathe deeply. Many elderly people don't breathe deeply, which can increase their chances of pneumonia.



Tillie Nelson of Turlock has never been on oxygen, but after having a heart attack and bypass surgery she was placed on oxygen to help regulate her breathing. With the help of the respiratory therapy, after only a week she was able to quit the oxygen and in another week she will be able to go home. Nelson said her favorite exercise was the "Endorphin," which is also called the arm bike.

Residents can sit in a chair or in their wheelchair and they rotate two pedals while concentrating on breathing in and out. The secret, Nelson said, is "breathe in the nose and out the mouth".

In addition to the exercise and breathing techniques, Spradling has instruments such as flutter valve and Pflex, which help patients become aware of their breathing patterns. The Pflex looks like a harmonica but has a valve to regulate resistance. The patient will breathe into the instrument, gradually learning how to breathe deeper as the resistance increased.

Rehab Director Donna Haile said Turlock Nursing and Rehab is able to offer the respiratory rehabilitation because Medicare is willing to pay for it. However, she said the center is having a hard time convincing any HMO's to pay for the care. The center will usually work on 10 to 15 patients who live at the center at a time, plus one or two outpatients recommended by local physicians.