

Numb fingers could be illness

DEAR DR. DONOHUE: Something funny has happened to my right thumb and index finger. In the past month, they've become numb. They don't hurt during the day, but sometimes, at night, my thumb wakes me up because of pain. I move the fingers with no trouble. Do you know what's going on? — L.P.



DONOHUE

ANSWER: I believe you have carpal tunnel syndrome.

A large nerve in the forearm passes into the hand through a tunnel in the wrist (carpus). The floor of the tunnel is wrist bones; the sides are finger tendons, and the top is a strong ligament. The tunnel doesn't have very much room. If any of those structures becomes slightly swollen, the nerve is compressed and the signs of carpal tunnel syndrome appear.

Numbness, tingling or pain in the thumb, index, middle and adjacent half of the ring finger — all of them or some of them — are the first signs that the nerve is trapped. As time passes, the same fingers might become weak, and they become clumsy. Worsening of symptoms at night is typical. About half of carpal tunnel syndrome patients experience these phenomena in both hands.

The cause? Illnesses like diabetes and rheumatoid arthritis might be in the background. Pregnancy often brings on carpal tunnel. Occupational hazards like operating a pneumatic drill can bring it on. For many, there is no explanation.

Do you want to try a test? Press the backs of both hands together, in front of your chest, with fingers pointed down. Exert firm pressure. If numbness or pain increases, that's a positive test and a sign of carpal tunnel syndrome. Don't rely on this test or my transcontinental guess as a diagnosis. See your family doctor.

A wrist splint rests the wrist and reduces swelling. It might have to be used only at night. A doctor can inject a cortisone drug in the region of the tunnel to relieve symptoms. In persistent cases, surgically freeing the nerve cures this common condition.

DEAR DR. DONOHUE: For the past two years, my daughter has battled anorexia. Two years ago, she looked skeletal. I persuaded her to get treatment, and she agreed — to my surprise. She has done well and is looking somewhat better.

However, she hasn't had a menstrual period during this time. Does that mean she's not able to have children? Will she ever have periods again? — W.M.

ANSWER: Once your daughter gains some more weight, her periods ought to resume. Once she has periods, her fertility also will return.

DEAR DR. DONOHUE: About four weeks ago, my right leg became terribly painful. It swelled, and the skin was red. Finally, I had my husband take me to the hospital.

The doctors did some tests and said I had a vein clot. They admitted me and put me on blood thinners. Currently I take Coumadin.

Did the medicines dissolve the clot? I began to feel better shortly after I started taking them. — R.K.

ANSWER: In some circumstances, clot-dissolving medicines are used. For most, however, anti-coagulants are the treatment. They're popularly called blood thinners. They don't dissolve the clot; they prevent its growth, and they keep pieces of the clot from breaking loose. The pieces that break off often are swept in the bloodstream to the lungs, where they cut off blood supply to the involved part of the lung. That's a pulmonary embolus, and it can be fatal.

I don't know if the blood thinners made you feel better so quickly, or if it was the pain medicine that you probably received.

Dr. Donohue is a syndicated columnist.

Branchville nurse lauded for invention

By **LYNDSAY CAYETANA BOUCHAL**
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NEWTON — Karla Coombs's invention of the FROG (Fluid Rx on the Go) has leaped to success after being patented, approved by the Food and Drug Administration and purchased by Newton Memorial Hospital.

The 64-year old Branchville resident, who created the instrument, is being recognized for her efforts to enhance health care as the winner of the Innovation Hero award in NJ BIZ Magazine's Healthcare Hero program. The award was announced Friday at the Palace at Somerset Park.

"We are very excited for her and we are very proud of her," said hospital spokesman John Brand.

As a nurse in the acute care rehabilitation unit at Newton Memorial Hospital, Coombs was working with a patient who would be administering her own medication. Since the patient had difficulty swallowing, a tube was inserted into her stomach and a syringe attached to the tube delivered her medication. Many nurses found this method to be ineffective. Patients would cough or sneeze and involuntarily cause the tube to dislodge from the syringe, which resulted in the loss of fluid and an inaccurate dosage of medication.

In 2002, Coombs developed a new delivery system to improve dosing accuracy and the quality of patient care. Medication would no longer be injected into the tube that fed into the patient's stomach; instead, Coombs replaced the syringe with an elevated drip chamber, allowing gravity to take over and afford a hands-free delivery method for nurses.

"There was already a Kangaroo



Photo courtesy Newton Memorial Hospital

Newton Memorial Hospital nurse Karla Coombs places a Fluid Rx on the Go (FROG), which is an elevated drip chamber that administers medication. She has patented the method and was honored Friday with an Innovation Hero Award by NJ BIZ magazine.

pump for 24-hour feedings, so I called it a FROG," Coombs said. "It's cute — something kids and adults would be receptive to."

Coombs and her husband developed the invention on their own, using their own funds, Brand said. "It was a personal mission," he said.

Coombs applied for a federal patent in June 2002 and by July 2004, the FROG became a fully patented product in the United States. Coombs then applied for FDA approval in 2005 and was granted approval in December 2008.

"As an individual, applying for FDA approval was a challenge," Coombs said. "I wasn't familiar with the process."

Coombs has also received patents in Canada, China, Japan and Europe.

After the delivery device underwent a rigorous trial period to determine the advantages and shortcomings of the mechanism, Newton Memorial Hospital this year became the first facility in the world to buy the FROG.

The trial revealed one minor error involving a weak material, which caused the FROG to fall when hung on an IV hanger. Coombs said the issue has been addressed.

Newton Memorial found the advantages of the FROG to far outweigh the disadvantages.

Monica Ferraro, a nurse at Newton hospital, said the ability to move her hands freely rather than manually administering medication allows her to help the patient more easily. Additionally, the device is no longer dislodged if the patient accidentally moves.

HEALTH BRIEFS

Support groups to meet

HAMBURG — The Sussex County Multiple Strengths MS Self-Help Group meets the first Wednesday of each month at 1 p.m. at the Sussex County YMCA, 15 Wits End Road. For information, contact Nick at 973-841-3197 or Marchesani7@aim.com.

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NEWTON — Dr. M. Nicolai Nielsen, area psychiatrist, will be the guest speaker at this Thursday's business/advocacy meeting of the Sussex County affiliate of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). Dr. Nielsen will make a presentation on bipolar disorder, followed by questions and answers. The presentation will begin at 7 p.m. at Sussex House, on the grounds of Newton Memorial Hospital, 175 High St. Attendance is free and the event is open to all.

Nielsen is president and executive medical director of InHealth Associates, a private multi-specialty behavioral health group practice in Lafayette. A former president of the New Jersey Psychiatric Association, he has served the New Jersey, Pennsylvania and New York communities for more than 30 years.

Nielsen's talk will be followed at 8 p.m. by the monthly business/advocacy meeting of NAMI-Sussex County. For information about NAMI's programs and services in Sussex County, call 973-214-0632.

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NEWTON — The monthly support group of the Sussex County affiliate of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) will be held July 5 at 7 p.m. at Sussex House, on the grounds of Newton Memorial Hospital, 175 High St. The group provides support and information for family members of mentally ill people. Confidentiality is always respected. For information, call 973-214-0632.

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SPARTA — Newton Memorial Hospital and the American Cancer Society will hold a Breast Cancer Support Group meeting from 6:30 to 9 p.m. July 13 at the Sparta

Health and Wellness Center, 89 Sparta Ave.

For more information or to register, call (800) 227-2345.

Screening offered

MILFORD, Pa. — Newton Memorial Hospital and the Pike County Health Fund will provide Dermascan screenings at the Milford Health &

Wellness Center.

The Dermascan is a simple box that uses ultraviolet light to show facial skin damage that is invisible to the naked eye. The screenings will be held from 4 to 7 p.m. July 14 at the Milford Health & Wellness Center.

Pre-registration is required. Call (973) 579-8340 or e-mail education@

nmhnj.org for more information.

Wellness program

MILFORD, Pa. — Newton Memorial Hospital and the Pike County Health Fund will provide an educational pro-

gram, "Heart Healthy Picnics," at the Milford Health & Wellness Center from 10 to 11:30 a.m. July 21 at the Milford Health & Wellness Center.

Call (973) 579-8340 or e-mail education@nmhnj.org for information or to register.

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