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**Hartford Courant**

**Hartford, Connecticut**

April 12, 2007

## **Hypnotic Hugs**

By HILARY WALDMAN, Courant Staff Writer

Apr. 12--Chandler Boucher had been fighting leukemia in the hospital for three weeks when his patience ran out.

The 8-year-old was tired of being sick. After enduring so much discomfort, the routine needle stick required to start his intravenous chemotherapy became more than he could bear. Chandler would cry and squirm, making a 10-minute procedure take three times as long.

Chandler's mother was at the end of her rope, too. She was willing to do anything to comfort her only son, but had run out of ideas.

"I said, 'I don't know what else to tell you,'" Theresa Lavoie said, recalling her frustration. "I can't take [the leukemia] away."

When a social worker suggested **hypnosis**, Lavoie was skeptical. At best, she thought it might take months to get relief. At worst, she envisioned Bugs Bunny swinging a pocket watch back and forth.

But it was nothing like that.

Looking for new ways to help children endure the fear, discomfort and downright horror that often accompanies aggressive cancer treatment, Connecticut Children's Medical Center is trying **hypnosis**. Along with acupuncture, relaxation and distraction techniques, it seems to be helping kids in a way that pills cannot.

Dr. J. Nathan Hagstrom, director of hematology and oncology at Connecticut Children's, became convinced of its benefits when an intern working toward a doctorate in psychology did a study at the hospital using **hypnosis** to help sickle cell patients control their pain. It was so successful that Hagstrom wanted to try it with cancer patients.

Hagstrom enlisted West Hartford psychologist Bob Deutsch to spend a half-day each week at the hospital. Trained in **hypnosis**, Deutsch has treated seriously ill children in his private office for years.

During one recent session at the hospital, Deutsch taught Chandler to imagine a comfortable place. He suggests a comfy cloud, but some children choose a boat, a submarine -- any place they'd like to be. Children can have their eyes open or closed. They can talk through the process, describing what they imagine and helping the **hypnosis** coach guide them deeper into the trance.

Deutsch encouraged Chandler to allow his mind to carry him off to a happy place. Chandler's favorite destination is Yankee Stadium.

"I'd close my eyes and think about what place I'd like to go to; the place I go to is a happier place," Chandler said. "You go to the concession stand, get your hotdog, popcorn, soda. If it's a baseball game, you watch the game."

He felt so comfortable on a recent morning that he rested placidly in his mother's lap while nurse Candie St. Jean inserted the needle that would allow him to get his chemotherapy.

Several large studies suggest that self-**hypnosis** helps children control bedwetting, procedure-related pain, headaches and even asthma. One researcher in Ohio found that children with sickle cell disease used far fewer painkillers when they learned **hypnosis** to control their disease-related flare-ups.

But although hypnotic techniques have been used throughout history in the form of ritual dances, drumming and meditation, there is still a great deal of doubt. Insurance does not cover the cost of teaching patients to use **hypnosis**, and there are few professionals trained to help children or adults use the technique.

"You say **hypnosis**, people are going to roll their eyes," said Dr. Candace Erickson, an associate professor of pediatrics at Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York. "I wanted to do research at Columbia and you would have thought I was bringing in witch doctors to dance around kids' beds."

But at Connecticut Children's, the program has been so successful that Deutsch has added a second half-day to his weekly schedule.

Deutsch says there is really nothing mysterious about **hypnosis**. He describes his role as that of an "imagination coach" and says that most children can use **hypnosis** to comfort themselves after just a few practice sessions.

Parents, nurses and social workers can easily prompt children into a hypnotic trance once they learn the technique. Children can even do it themselves. Deutsch sometimes makes a recording of his voice and allows his patients to download it to their iPods.

"I cannot hypnotize someone; that's a major misconception," Deutsch said. "I'm the guy who helps the child understand that he or she has their own [invisible swinging] watch, and it's there whenever they want to use it."

Mary Laliberte, a clinical social worker in the cancer clinic, frequently refers children for **hypnosis**. A 9-year-old named Nick was able to control his vomiting by boarding a comfy cloud in his mind and mentally traveling to his favorite Mexican restaurant each time he had to swallow a pill that made him sick to his stomach.

Nick, whose parents did not want his last name published, also learned to make his arm feel numb so a nurse could inject medication without hurting him.

A Hartford 6-year-old with sickle cell disease was able to relax through an otherwise terrifying blood test by imagining that he was wearing a shark suit and was swimming with a mommy and daddy shark.

"Our kids are often speechless because they are so in awe of what they are able to do," Laliberte said. "It can increase kids' self-confidence; they're so proud of this new skill they've learned and how they can use it."

For Chandler and his family, learning **hypnosis** has been life-changing.

Before Chandler learned to calm himself, he would start worrying on Sunday about his weekly visit to the clinic on Monday.

The Litchfield third-grader was so anxious about the needle stick to open his chemo port that his father, John, had to take time off from work to help comfort his son during the weekly procedure. Chandler no longer needs his dad to be with him every time.

"It does amaze me; I can say do you want to go to Yankee Stadium, and he's there," Theresa Lavoie said. "It's made life so much easier."

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