

# New Hilton Head Clinic Taps Into the Healing Power of Oxygen

**HILTON HEAD ISLAND, S.C.** – Sometimes the answer is right under your nose. When drugs or surgery don't work, patients suffering from certain injuries and autoimmune diseases are turning to something a little less conventional. It's called oxygen.

Hyperbaric oxygen therapy (HBOT) is a medical treatment that delivers 100 percent oxygen to a person within a pressurized chamber. During treatment, pressurized oxygen fills the chamber, increasing cellular oxygen concentration up to 20 times normal levels. Increased oxygen tension accelerates healing processes and aids recovery from certain conditions. It has been demonstrated to increase the body's immune capabilities, assisting with problems ranging from chronic wounds to complex disabilities and neurological impairment.

With HBOT, oxygen is readily transported by all body fluids to tissues and organs. Increased oxygenation produces long-term benefits including forming new blood vessels, new cell growth and helping white blood cells to destroy bacteria and remove toxins.

Pete Stephens, M.D. recently opened Hyperbaric Therapy of the Lowcountry on Hilton Head Island to make HBOT available to more people in the Lowcountry and throughout South Carolina and Georgia, and to help give HBOT greater "mainstream" visibility and acceptance.

"We have a hard time convincing some doctors," said Stephens. "To many of them, if it's not taught in medical school, they're not going to believe it. But there are some progressive doctors out



*Hyperbaric Therapy of the Lowcountry staff demonstrates the use of a hyperbaric chamber*

there who think 'I've got to try this and see what it does.'"

Stephens became familiar with HBOT during his 35 years practicing ER medicine in New Jersey. "Most hyperbaric physicians come out of ER," he said. "That's because until recently that's the only place in this country that was using them." Hyperbaric chambers were typically used for smoke inhalation, carbon monoxide poisoning and the bends. At the time, Stephens also sat on the board of directors for Environmental Tectonics Corp. (ETC), the manufacturer of the hyperbaric chamber in use at the Hilton Head clinic. "They asked me to research other uses for the chamber," he said.

Stephens continued his HBOT research and study after his 2004 retirement. Now, he has teamed up with Todd Johnson, M.D. and Lisa Lowry, M.D. to launch Hyperbaric Therapy of the Lowcountry. The clinic's capacity will be up to fourteen patients per day using computerized ETC-manufactured hyperbaric

chambers.

The clinic focuses its efforts on what are known as "off label" uses for HBOT. "When a drug is approved by the FDA, the usage for that drug is called 'on label,'" explained Stephens. "However, typically over 50% of drug usage is off label. For example, aspirin's on label use is for pain relief, but if you use it to thin blood, that's off label."

"There are thirteen on label applications for hyperbaric therapy, the most common being diabetic ulcers. Medicare will pay for that, but only after treating it conventionally for thirty days," said Stephens. "Third-degree burns are paid for by Medicare, second-degree burns are not. If hyperbaric therapy heals third degree burns, why wouldn't it heal second-degree burns? Third-degree burns are considered on label while second-degree burns are considered off label." HBOT advocates and practitioners hope that with continued research and development and documented success, demand for the treat-

ment will force greater mainstream acceptance by the medical and insurance industries, making HBOT accessible and affordable to more patients.

Jennifer McDonald travels to Hilton Head from Summerville, S.C. up to five times per week so that her three-year-old autistic son, Alexander, can receive HBOT therapy. "We tried applied behavioral analysis (ABA), speech and occupational therapy and those produced no results," said McDonald. "Right after (HBOT) treatments, he was calmer and he would hold my hand. Then words started to come. It is definitely something that all parents of autistic children should look into."

HBOT has been routine therapy internationally for years, but the practice lags behind in the U.S. Some good publicity came about in 2005 when Philadelphia Eagles wide receiver Terrell Owens sustained a severe ankle injury six weeks prior to the Super Bowl and was expected to be out of commission for months following surgery. But he rehabilitated the ankle with HBOT and took the field on Super Bowl Sunday. Stephens hopes that success stories like Owens's and McDonald's will lead to more widespread use in this country.

Meanwhile, Stephens and his associates will continue to work for the cause from their Hilton Head clinic. "There are about 20 facilities like ours in the country treating off label maladies, but few are using hyperbarics on rheumatoid arthritis and diverticulitis. The ones we've treated have done phenomenally well. We'll be writing papers on that to get the word out."