

Transplant provides hope to MS patients

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As a biologist, Linda Kinkel relies on science to guide her research.

But today, Kinkel, a Maple Park resident with multiple sclerosis, is depending on science to improve and extend the quality of her life.

Kinkel, 44, of far western Kane County, is the first multiple sclerosis patient in Chicago to receive a bone marrow transplant to treat the disabling neurological disease.

In multiple sclerosis, scattered patches of myelin in the brain and spinal cord are destroyed, causing symptoms including numbness, tingling and paralysis. Myelin is the protective covering on nerve fibers.

Kinkel underwent the experimental transplant last month, using her own bone marrow, as part of a national clinical trial testing the process as a treatment for MS, lupus and rheumatoid arthritis. Physicians say the best candidates for the procedure are those whose multiple sclerosis progresses rapidly.

The procedure involves collecting healthy stem cells from bone marrow, and destroying the immune system with radiation or chemotherapy. The stem cells are reinfused into the patient in a procedure similar to a blood transfusion, allowing the body to counteract the effects of losing myelin.

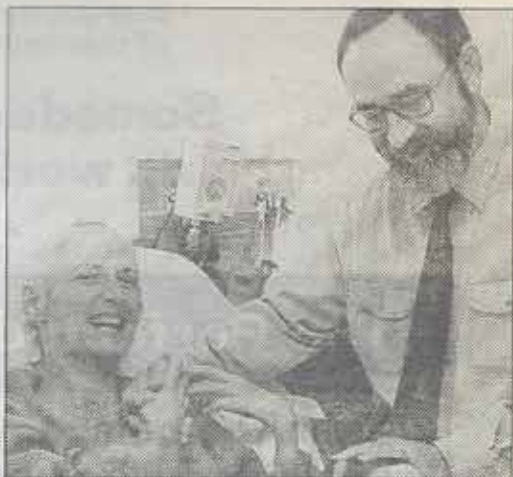
"I've been given a second life. There was no other option for me," said Kinkel, whose MS was diagnosed three years ago and who has suffered most severely from its effects in the last 18 months.

"Before this came along, we didn't really have much hope," said Kinkel's husband, Rod Walton.

Before surgery, Kinkel had lost the ability to move her left leg or to walk. Severe hand tremors made it impossible for her to feed herself, and her speech was slurred.

"She's moving her left leg for the first time in six months, and her hand tremors have decreased," said Dr. Richard Burt, an assistant professor of medicine and principal researcher in the study being conducted at Northwestern Memorial Hospital.

Though the search for a cure for multiple sclerosis continues, physicians said Thursday that the immediate results of Kinkel's transplant show promise for MS patients.



BOB RINGHAM/SUN-TIMES

Linda Kinkel and husband Rod Walton visit at Northwestern Memorial Hospital. Kinkel has recovered some mobility since surgery.