Muhammad Ali Parkinson Center's Youngest Patient Praises New "Sci-Fi" Procedure

PR Newswire

First experiencing symptoms at just 29-years-old and diagnosed with Parkinson's at age 34, Tommy Zuleger is the youngest patient ever treated at the Muhammad Ali Parkinson Center at Barrow Neurological Institute in Phoenix and he says a new "sci-fi" procedure has given him his life back.

The real estate executive recently underwent a new procedure at Barrow called Asleep Deep Brain Stimulation (DBS), which involves surgically implanting a medical device, called a "brain pacemaker," while the patient is under general anesthesia. In select brain regions, DBS has provided remarkable therapeutic benefits for otherwise treatment-resistant movement disorders such as Parkinson's disease, tremor and dystonia.

"At first it was nothing major; my right hand would shake," recalls Zuleger, now 38. "But over time the shaking grew worse, I started to feel stiffer than a thirty-something. At thirty-four-years-old, I learned I had Parkinson's."

Parkinson's disease is generally thought of as a disease affecting the elderly, but the National Parkinson Foundation reports more people are being diagnosed with the disease at a younger age. Approximately 10 percent of the one million people living with the disease in the United States are under the age of 40.

Zuleger says he was initially in shock. "I wasn't upset that I had Parkinson's. I was upset because I had it and there wasn't a thing I could do to stop it," he adds.

Though Zuleger had heard of DBS, he explains that at first it wasn't something he seriously considered as an option. "Brain surgery was too scary, especially if I had to be awake while they did it."

By 2012, Zuleger's symptoms had begun to worsen. Fortunately, surgical technology at Barrow had also advanced in that time which allowed his neurologist at the Ali center, Arshia Sadreddin, MD, to recommend a new treatment option—Asleep DBS.

"This new asleep procedure allows us to approach a larger group of patients who would have previously declined the treatment," says Dr. Sadreddin. "It is a real breakthrough for those who are anxious about having awake brain surgery, and for patients like Tommy who are young, healthy and have lesser chance of side effects from general anesthesia."

While DBS has been around for a number of years, the surgeons at Barrow have taken it to a new level by allowing patients to "sleep" during the procedure. Today Barrow surgeons are performing more DBS procedures than at any hospital in the nation and Barrow is one of only a handful of institutions to offer the "asleep" procedure.

Last year, Zuleger began to prepare for the surgery as a patient in the Ali center's new DBS Clinic. "After doing a lot of research, it didn't sound as scary, and actually began to look more and more promising."

Zuleger had the surgery last October and is now back to work and loving life with his wife and four children. "My whole world changed. It was like someone was flipping a switch on in my brain. I know that DBS isn't a cure, but I feel better than I have in years and I hope that it will help to control my symptoms for years to come."

Dr. Sadreddin emphasizes that there is still no cure for Parkinson's disease and DBS is not an effective treatment for all patients. She adds, however, that this new procedure can allow more patients the opportunity to benefit from an improved quality of life they would not have enjoyed previously on medication alone.

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