

M.D. NEWS

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An Important Resource
for Physicians

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Helping physicians find relief for their patients who suffer from a variety of medical conditions is a major goal of the Sleep Wellness Institute, the West Allis clinic that is the largest independent sleep disorders treatment center in Wisconsin.

“Obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) can result in a wide variety of disorders that can affect an individual during the day,” says Don Harden, M.D., a sleep specialist and Co-Medical Director of the Institute. In fact, “Physicians are wise to consider sleep issues contributing to the differential diagnosis of patients, including those with hypertension.”

More than 18 million Americans are estimated to have OSA, which is similar to the number with type 1 diabetes and asthma. Sadly, Dr. Harden notes, “Many individuals with obstructive sleep apnea do not realize they have this disorder, which is amenable to

treatment and relief.”

OSA is characterized by obstruction of the upper airway during sleep. This causes breaks or pauses in the individual’s breathing, preventing air from entering the lungs and forcing the person to awake briefly to start breathing again before falling back to sleep. This happens multiple times per hour, and the person usually is unaware of it happening.

The Sleep Wellness Institute was founded in 1994 by Mark Stoiber and Ron Baake as “Pulmonary Diagnostics and Consulting.” Mr. Stoiber is a registered polysomnographic technician, and Mr. Baake is a respiratory therapist. Initially, they focused on in-home testing and treatment of patients with sleep apnea. By 1999, they changed the name and developed the first independent sleep disorders laboratory in the state, opening a four-bed facility in Wauwatosa.

All of the sleep study rooms at the Sleep Wellness Institute are designed to facilitate sleep by providing an extremely comfortable, home-like atmosphere. The rooms are available for studies around the clock, seven days per week.





Don Harden, M.D., Co-Medical Director of the Sleep Wellness Institute, thoroughly explains sleep study results and makes recommendations to a patient and his wife.

The current facility in West Allis, at 2356 S. 102nd Street, has nine beds and operates around the clock seven days per week as a convenience to patients who may work one or more of the three shifts in a 24-hour day. Plans are now in the works to expand the current site and double the number of sleep testing rooms.

BENEFITS TO REFERRING PHYSICIANS ARE IMPORTANT

Dr. Harden and Dr. Gary Leo, the Co-Medical Directors, emphasize not only convenience to patients, but prompt reporting to referring physicians. Patients referred to the clinic are usually scheduled for a sleep study, if indicated, within a week, the results are scored within another day, and their referring physician receives an in-depth interpretation of the results within one to two business days.

“Typically, our turnaround times are much faster than with other facilities,” Mr. Baake notes, “because we operate around the clock and because we understand the referring physician’s need for prompt information.” Dr. Harden notes that the quick turnaround times will facilitate prompt treatment. Improvements in a patient’s condition can include such things as relief from excessive daytime somnolence to decreases in blood pressure.

Although some patients self-refer to the Sleep Wellness Institute, many are referred by their physicians. “Internists, family practitioners, pediatricians, otolaryngologists and allergists generate most of the referrals,” Mr. Stoiber says.

PEDIATRIC OSA CAN MIMIC ADHD SYMPTOMS

Patients present differently according to age group. Dr. Harden states that pediatric patients tend to have snoring but not observed

apnea. They are likely to exhibit hyperkinetic behavior during the day that can mimic ADHD. They can also present with difficulty awakening in the morning and problems with school work.

“Diagnosing this condition in children is important because we know that the first few years of school set the pace, academically, for what will follow,” Dr. Harden notes. Polysomnograms or sleep studies are important in diagnosing this disorder in children. Sleep studies can help determine which patients are candidates for surgical procedures, such as tonsillectomy, and those who have severe obstructive sleep apnea who may need to have upper airway support such as CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure) prior to going to surgery.

With snoring adults, apnea is more often observed at home than with children. Adult

patients with OSA may experience excessive daytime somnolence, drowsiness at work, and may be dangerously drowsy while driving. They may also have problems with concentration, making executive-type decisions, and increased irritability.

Overweight males under the age of 65 tend to have an increased risk of obstructive sleep apnea, as do women who are past the age of menopause. Neck size and shape of the pharynx, or upper airway, can give clues to whether obstructive sleep apnea is present. Weight tends to be less of an issue for men above the age of 65.

OSA CAN LEAD TO MYOCARDIAL INFARCTION

Obstructive sleep apnea may also complicate other illnesses such as diabetes or cardiovascular diseases. Complications from obstructive sleep apnea can range from bradyarrhythmias, which are a slowdown of the heart rate, to possible myocardial infarctions.

What does the OSA patient exhibit while attempting to sleep? Mr. Stoiber provides the following example: “Imagine someone punching you in the shoulder and jolting you awake 50-100 times per hour, every hour, night after night. That’s sleep apnea,” Mr. Stoiber says. “It’s like driving on a freeway at 65 miles per hour, and suddenly switching to a gravel road. The jolt is tremendous, and the heart and other organs can be significantly affected.”

Although options and oral appliances are available for some patients, and some with minor apnea can be treated through diet and exercise, the preferred treatment for severe OSA is regular use of a CPAP mask that blows air through the nasal passages to keep the upper airway from collapsing.

WEIGHT LOSS, ALONE, IS NOT THE ANSWER

CPAP is often the treatment used for obstructive sleep apnea.

Among the immediate benefits of CPAP treatment is relief from excessive daytime somnolence and, in the long run, decreased blood pressure. Other benefits may include an improvement in mood as well as relief from fatigue. Both of these may facilitate weight loss in the sense that individuals may feel more energetic and feel like participat-

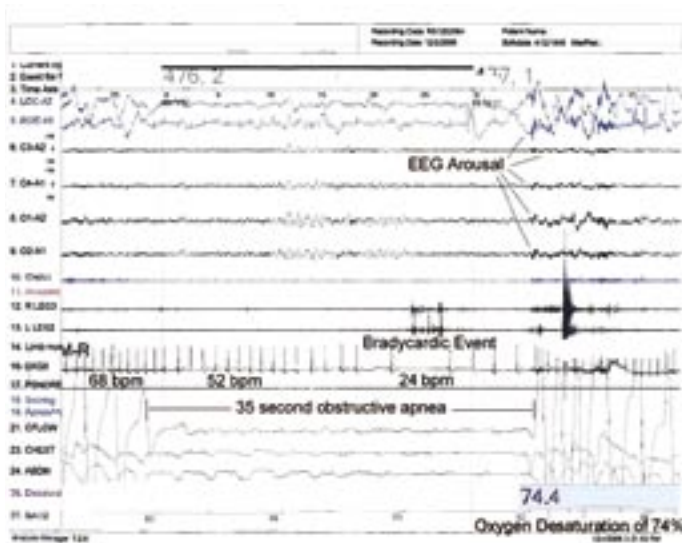
ing in exercise programs and be better able to manage their diet.

The Sleep Wellness Institute does extensive follow-up with patients to keep track of their CPAP experience and to encourage continued use. It also offers an online CPAP forum at its website, www.sleep-well.org, for users of the equipment. They also discuss other options that are available for obstructive sleep apnea.

Obstructive sleep apnea was a major contributing cause to the death of former Green Bay Packers star and National Football League hall of famer Reggie White. His widow, Sara, and the White family now work in conjunction with the Sleep Wellness Institute and have developed the Reggie White Sleep Disorders Education and Research Foundation.

The Foundation strives to enhance public health through increased awareness of sleep and sleep disorders. "Ultimately, the foundation's goal is to ensure that all individuals, regardless of their background, receive the care they need to overcome the sleep disorders that prevent them from leading a healthy and vigorous life," Mr. Stoiber says. He encourages physicians and other interested parties to contact him for more information on the Foundation and how to become involved in its work.

The Sleep Wellness Institute and the foundation can be reached at (414) 336-3000. ■



This electronic monitoring chart of a patient's sleep study clearly shows lack of breathing for 35 seconds, a bradycardic event, and serious oxygen desaturation due to sleep apnea.

Founders of the Sleep Wellness Institute are CEO Ron Baake (left) and President Mark Stoiber, standing in the Institute's private garden area.



PHOTO BY JOHN ROBERTS