

Controversial Therapy Keeps Gregory On Ice

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By TOMMY HINE, Courant Staff Writer

When doctors told Melissa Gregory she would be in a cast for three weeks, she slipped into denial for the second time that day. Hours earlier, when a 45-pound weight fell off its rack and landed on her left foot while training in Newark, Del., Gregory refused to admit she was hurt.

"We were supposed to have practice that evening," she said. "I didn't think it was broken. I said, 'If I ice it, I'll be OK.'"

Denis Petukhov, her husband and ice dance partner, insisted she go to the emergency room. X-rays revealed Gregory's worst fears.

"They said, 'It's fractured. We're going to have to cast it,'" Gregory said. "I said, 'No. You aren't doing anything like that. I've got to go skate. Absolutely not.'"

"They thought I was nuts. ... I would not let them cast my foot."

Instead, Gregory and Petukhov, three-time U.S. silver medalists, remembered the experimental work of East Hartford doctor Petra Mursch, whom they met last year when they trained at the International Skating Center in Simsbury.

They decided to try alternative treatment - cold laser therapy - after the July 28 accident. Four days after Gregory fractured the second metatarsal in her left foot, she was skating again.

Last year Gregory and Petukhov worked with Mursch experimenting with cold laser therapy on small injuries such as pulled muscles.

"It seemed to work great for us last year," Gregory said.

Cold lasers have been used to treat pain from soft-tissue injuries for years, but only recently have chiropractors and other proponents claimed it can be effective in bone repair.

"The doctor said it was a clean fracture, all the way through the bone," Gregory said. "It was not a spiral or diagonal fracture, which would have been a lot worse."

The cold lasers, proponents say, speed up the healing process by stimulating cell growth and regeneration. The therapy also decreases inflammation and infection, reducing the need for pain medication.

Erchonia Medical, based in Mesa, Ariz., is the leading bio-medical laser manufacturer, and it recently introduced the 3LT, the first low level laser given market approval by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Erchonia says cold laser therapy is non-invasive, painless and has been approved for use in everything from liposuction to treating acne.

"We have to be careful," Petukhov said. "We can only say it helped the fracture. We can't say it healed or cured it."

Still, not every doctor is convinced of the merits of cold laser therapy, at least not its ability to heal broken bones.

Jeffrey Brown is Director of Sports Medicine at Hartford Medical Group, an affiliate of Hartford Hospital. He hasn't seen Gregory's X-rays, but he thinks her quick return was due more to the degree of her fracture and the treatment of tissue surrounding it, not a quick-heal of her fracture.

"Does cold laser therapy help fracture healing? Zero evidence," Brown said. "There's zero evidence it can do that."

Still, after their experience last year with Mursch, Gregory wanted to try it again. Distraught over the thought of missing the start of the skating season and Skate America in the Hartford Civic Center Oct. 26-29, Gregory called her mother on the trip home from the hospital.

"I was hysterical," Gregory said. "Being a concerned mother, she called the laser company, Erchonia. They put her in touch with the president of the company, and he called a doctor in Delaware where we now train."

Dr. Ted Carrick, a chiropractic neurologist, was at his weekend home at the time, but he told Gregory to come to his beach house the next day.

"After four days, I put my foot in my skate and got back on the ice," Gregory said. "Four days."

Brown understands how the quick return was possible.

"Things can happen," he said. "Cold laser therapy, based on the people who use it, has treated soft tissue pain and tendons, tendinitis, tendon injuries.

"In her case, it's possible that there was some benefit to the soft tissue around the fracture, the muscle tendons around her injury. Maybe this helped calm that area down. But it would not be fracture healing or bone healing ... So, therefore in the medical world, insurance companies won't cover the treatment."

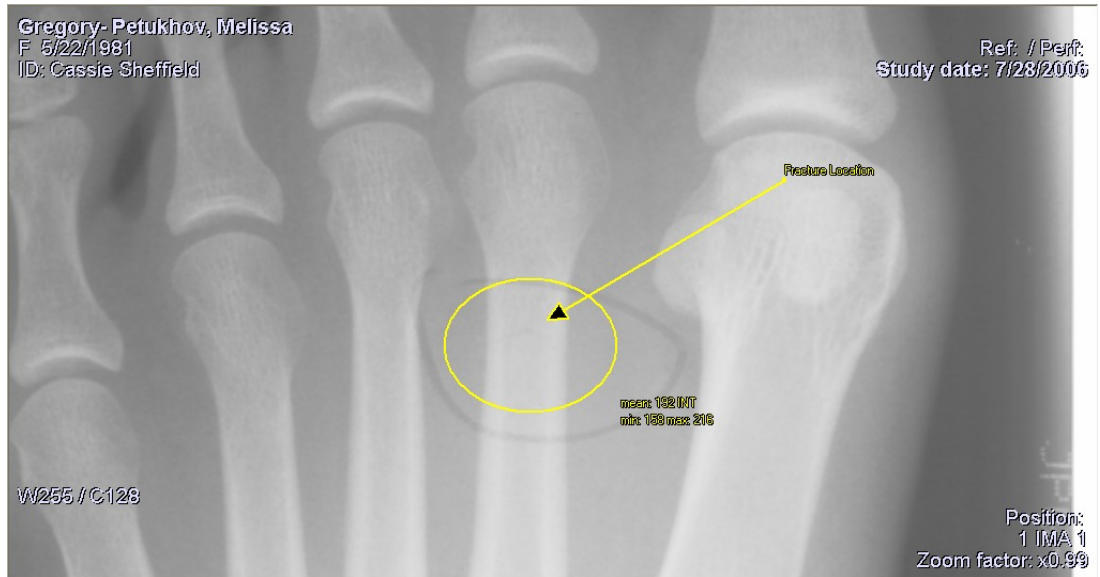
Gregory and Petukhov are so convinced of the benefits of cold laser therapy, they now keep a portable, hand-held Erchonia device in the trunk of their car.

"I think there's always interest in something new that will get people better quicker and is more effective," Brown said. "There are always going to be new products and new technology that people will try. Currently, there is no evidence that this is better than placebo.

"But there also is no evidence that it causes harm, either. So, will we see this in the future on all sports teams? It's possible. It's just one more modality to try."



X-Ray of Fracture



X-Ray Post Laser Treatments

