

# Experience with VitalStim<sup>®</sup> Therapy in an Inpatient Rehabilitation Setting

The following paper is based on question and answer interviews with executives of two different inpatient rehabilitation facilities in Chattanooga, TN: **Linda Lind, Chief Operating Officer, Siskin Hospital for Physical Rehabilitation**, and **Donna Bourdon, Chief Executive Officer, HealthSouth Chattanooga Rehabilitation Hospital**. Topics covered include ease of adoption, facility statistics, outcomes, occurrence of complications, cost of care, and general comments.

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## Introduction

Inpatient rehabilitation hospitals are often the first line of defense in treating patients with dysphagia. Here we profile two successful hospitals whose growth strategies include the VitalStim Therapy program that transcends cost cutting and other measures, thereby improving overall patient outcomes and staff satisfaction. Not only have these facilities demonstrated that successful programs in dysphagia management using VitalStim Therapy are clinically successful, but their very approach to innovation has resulted in exceptional clinical quality, patient and doctor/clinician satisfaction and operational efficiencies.

In order to continually improve the quality of the care they deliver, inpatient rehabilitation facilities must strive for high performance as measured by clinical quality, patient satisfaction, and operational effectiveness. The diversity of inpatient rehabilitation providers and the resulting multitude of individual business situations mean that the metrics to actually measure high performance will vary, facility by facility. Yet, the high-performance providers discussed here share a strategic vision, a willingness to embrace change and outstanding execution skills. These attributes enable them to deliver highly innovative solutions – a factor that distinguishes them from non-adaptors or adversaries.

## Facility statistics and patient mix

Siskin Hospital for Physical Rehabilitation in Chattanooga treats dysphagia both in an 80-bed acute inpatient rehabilitation hospital and a 29-bed skilled nursing facility, serving a 4-state area. HealthSouth Chattanooga Rehabilitation Hospital is a 69-bed acute inpatient rehabilitation hospital, also serving the Chattanooga area. The patient mix is similar for both hospitals: 25% orthopedic admissions, 20% stroke admissions, and the remainder distributed over a variety of other diagnoses. Both hospitals were early adopters (>3 years) and pioneers in implementation of VitalStim Therapy and both invested in certification training for their entire Speech-Language Pathology staff.

## Protocols and outcome tracking

VitalStim Therapy at both hospitals follows general guidelines established during certification training. The specifics of the individual treatment sessions are determined by the therapist, who adjusts the intensity of the current and the duration of the treatment based on the individual patient's tolerance. While neither hospital has a formal protocol for the delivery of VitalStim Therapy, Siskin Hospital has developed guidelines to ensure best practices and is participating in research to establish formal protocols.

Both hospitals are strong proponents of tracking patient outcomes, and both report data to an independent database [Functional Independence Measures (FIM), Uniform Data Systems]. In addition, Siskin Hospital also tracks the patient's oral intake using the Functional Oral Intake Scale (FOIS) developed by Dr. Michael Crary (Gainesville, FL).

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## Changes in outcomes, complications since implementing VitalStim Therapy

Clinical quality – usually defined as a better and safer care environment – is a top priority at both hospitals, encompassing both clinical processes and clinical outcomes. At a time when capital resources are carefully prioritized, success comes from a willingness to embrace change, combined with outstanding execution skills. These attributes are driving VitalStim Therapy providers like the two highlighted here to deliver impressive outcomes – a significant differentiator from non-users.

HealthSouth Chattanooga Rehabilitation Hospital reports seeing more patients coming off feeding tubes since initiating VitalStim Therapy, and also notes an increase in FIM scores and patients going home with a normal diet. According to Bourdon, “We are having more success getting people off their tube and on a modified or even a regular diet.”

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Siskin Hospital reports that their outcome results are still somewhat subjective since they do not have FOIS data on their pre-VitalStim Therapy patients, but according to Lind, “We have seen many patients who haven't eaten for years resume an oral diet following VitalStim Therapy treatment.”

Both hospitals report that complications as a result of VitalStim Therapy have been negligible. Most cases involve discomfort and/or a reddening of the skin as reported in the FDA data. In no case was it necessary to discontinue treatment. According to Lind, “There are patients who just don't buy-in to the therapy even though they could benefit – that's the biggest negative we see.”

### Impact on the cost of care

For HealthSouth Chattanooga Rehabilitation Hospital, VitalStim Therapy is not a profit center. Considering the cost of electrodes, equipment, and training, it costs less to treat with traditional therapies. However, according to Bourdon, “We are seeing a dramatic increase in the quality of care, which helps us attract more neuro patients and helps keep our facility utilization high.”

Siskin Hospital for Physical Rehabilitation reports a similar experience. Their costs per session are also greater due to electrode costs and training, but, according to Lind, the ultimate result is an overall savings for the hospital and for the healthcare system in general. “Any patient who can eat an adequate oral diet enjoys many benefits, including fewer readmissions and better overall health. There are many studies that show the benefits of good nutrition.”

Value is created by generating improved patient outcomes and sustaining clinical excellence. These two core capabilities are the attributes that set certain providers apart from others. As demonstrated above, a successful VitalStim Therapy dysphagia program transcends cost-cutting and other measures that normally impede forward progress. Providers must commit themselves to exceeding patient expectations for excellent care outcomes, availability of innovative new modalities and other patient-centered metrics.

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## Patients and staff satisfaction

Siskin Hospital reports that clinicians feel the overall benefit to patients is greater with VitalStim Therapy than with a traditional approach. For patients with cognitive difficulties, it helps that the therapy “is done to them” rather than having them understand swallowing exercises. Equally impressive results have been achieved in early stroke survivors who do not have the stamina for other therapies. Siskin Hospital notes that the VitalStim Therapy dysphagia program has boosted job satisfaction as clinicians appreciate learning new skills and utilizing state-of-the-art techniques.

HealthSouth Chattanooga Rehabilitation Hospital also reports a high level of satisfaction among patients who find swallowing easier when using VitalStim Therapy than without it. Clinical staff is thrilled to provide patients with better outcomes utilizing this superior modality, and they would like to see a home unit for patients developed.

## Marketing VitalStim Therapy

Both hospitals operate in a very competitive market in the same geographical area, so creating awareness of the availability of VitalStim Therapy is important. They mention the new modality prominently in collateral materials, on their website, in their literature and on their list of services. Significantly, even though these facilities operate in the same market, both have thrived in their VitalStim Therapy program because of their commitment to quality of care and patient outcomes.

## Closing comments

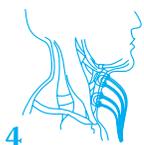
Donna Bourdon: “We are so pleased with our results that we have worked with Chattanooga Group to implement VitalStim Therapy throughout the entire HealthSouth system. We believe in the technology!”

Linda Lind: “VitalStim is a huge benefit to nutrition – we are very pleased to offer this treatment option to our patients to improve their quality of life.”

[To assist facilities like these in their marketing efforts, Chattanooga Group has recently completed a major public relations marketing kit to facilitate dissemination of information on the availability of VitalStim Therapy and to generate patient referrals. The kit comprises a user-friendly series of templates designed to make it easy to attract media attention. Copies of the kit are available via the VitalStim Therapy Resource Network.]

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1-800-506-1130  
+1-423-870-7200  
vitalstimtherapy.com