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## New treatment promises hope during pandemic

by Duane Pohlman, WKRC  
Monday, July 20th 2020

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CINCINNATI (WKRC) - From Louisiana to Long Island, hyperbaric chambers, once used only to treat divers suffering from the bends, are increasingly being used to treat COVID-19 patients with surprising success.

While the numbers are small, doctors at more than a dozen hospitals across the country say hyperbaric oxygen therapy (HBOT) is saving the lives of even the most critically ill coronavirus patients.

"The results thus far are pretty impressive," Dr. Thomas Serena, founder and director of **the SerenaGroup**, a family of wound, hyperbaric and research companies, said in a recent interview.

At **NYU Winthrop Hospital** in Mineola, New York, **Dr. Scott Gorenstein**, the director of hyperbaric medicine, said, "I'm encouraged that hyperbaric oxygen could be a benefit."

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## THE CHINESE RESULTS

Months ago, when the coronavirus was still centered in China, Dr. Harch worked with a group of Chinese doctors **who were studying the effects of the HBOT on severely ill COVID-19** patients.

The results of the Chinese study that Dr. Harch helped publish in English were among the first to show HBOT had helped dozens of COVID-19 patients avoid being placed on ventilators and recover from the virus, including five critically ill patients, who all recovered and have been released.

“The science is there to argue hyperbaric oxygen for coronavirus,” Dr. Harch said in a recent Zoom interview from his home office.

## **FDA SKEPTICAL ABOUT HBOT**

But the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) remains skeptical about the effectiveness of HBOT for treating anything other than the 14 conditions it approves. On its website, **the FDA even delivers a strong warning against using HBOT for a variety of illnesses that are considered “off label.”**

Government scientists cite a lack of rigorous studies as the reason for their pushback against off-label use of HBOT.

## **THE NEW YORK STUDY: SMALL NUMBERS, BIG RESULTS**

At NYU Langone Health, **David Lee**, an assistant professor of emergency medicine research at New York University, and **Dr. Gorenstein** teamed up when New York was the epicenter of the pandemic, developing a case-control to see the real effects of HBOT on coronavirus patients.

“Our hope is that through doing this in a rigorous way, we can try to overcome sort of the stigma that surrounds hyperbaric therapy,” Dr. Lee said.

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Their study compared 20 COVID-19 patients who received HBOT to 60 similar patients who did not. While their study is being peer-reviewed and has yet to be published, the results they shared are stunning.

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HBOT, only two needed to be placed on ventilators and both died, which is a much lower mortality rate of 10%.

"It's small numbers," Dr. Lee noted in a cautious tone but added, "The findings suggest that hyperbaric oxygen could reduce the mortality of this disease by half."

Dr. Gorenstein also cautioned against using the study to create a rush toward HBOT because of how ill COVID-19 patients are when considering treatment options.

"The mere act of transporting a patient from a medical floor where they're being treated with oxygen and bringing them down to hyperbaric, if that's not done safely, that could actually kill a patient," Dr. Gorenstein said.

### **BIGGER STUDY + MORE MONEY = TOUGH SELL**

While the results of the NYU Winthrop Hospital study are impressive, both doctors emphasized their results need to be studied further.

"While these results are promising, what it really means is we need to do a larger trial," Dr. Lee said.

But a big study takes a lot of time and costs big money, and even the doctors admit that's a tough sell for a treatment that is not a drug.

"Getting funding for these types of trials is difficult because there's no big pharmaceutical company that has a large profit," Dr. Gorenstein said, adding with his arms raised, "That's just the way the world is right now."

### **DATA REVEALING EVEN BETTER RECOVERY RATES**

Meanwhile, Dr. Serena is collecting data from doctors across the country and says he's already

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"It seems to work in 80%," Dr. Serena said, pausing to add, "80 to 90% range."

Yet, Dr. Harch says many doctors who are struggling with the decision of placing a patient on a ventilator aren't even aware of the HBOT option. And while scientific studies are costly and slow, even the doctors committed to the skepticism of rigorous review remain optimistic.

In a moment of candor during an interview, Dr. Gorenstein stopped and uttered a question, "What if we find out hyperbaric works?"

In the middle of a pandemic, that question is in clear focus for many who are now working hard to find the answer.

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