

EPILEPSY TREATMENT

A Return to Independence

For almost 12 years, epileptic seizures ruled Melissa Thomas' life. Whether she was in a restaurant, trying to enjoy a walk with her mother or driving to work, the 33-year-old mother of one lived in fear of when and where the next seizure would strike.

"I was on several medications, but the seizures still weren't being controlled," Ms. Thomas explains. "It was becoming embarrassing and dangerous. My life was beginning to revolve around the seizures."

Ms. Thomas experienced her first seizure while a student at Rutgers University in 2001. Initially, she attributed the heart palpitations and bladder control issues to anxiety attacks and stress. Doctors could not identify the cause of her issues until her boyfriend, who happened to be visiting her at college one evening, saw her have a seizure.

"I don't remember anything that happened, but my boyfriend said that I was shaking and bit my lip," the Plainfield resident says.

She was rushed to Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital (RWJ) by paramedics and remained there for 5 days undergoing a series of tests, which revealed that she had a lesion the size of a pinky nail on the left side of the base of her brain. Doctors determined that it was likely causing her seizures.

Doctors spent years adjusting and prescribing new medications, with limited results. Eventually, Ms. Thomas' doctor, Ram Mani, MD, Assistant Professor of Neurology at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School who specializes in epilepsy, recommended that she have surgery.

Ms. Thomas was reluctant to undergo an invasive procedure. As she weighed the decision, her mother saw a segment on the Discovery Health Channel about minimally invasive options to treat epilepsy. Luckily, the minimally invasive laser ablation procedure was available at RWJ, where Shabbar Danish, MD, Assistant Professor of Surgery; Director, Stereotactic and Functional Neurosurgery at RWJ, is highly experienced in this technology, having performed more than 100 laser ablations to treat epilepsy and brain tumors.

Laser ablation is a new technology that utilizes light energy to target the area of the brain that is responsible for causing epileptic seizures. It's also used to destroy tumors within the brain. Laser energy is delivered to the target area using a small probe. As light is delivered through the probe, temperatures in the target area rise, destroying the unwanted tissue, but leaving healthy tissue unharmed.

"Because laser ablation is highly precise and a much less invasive approach than traditional surgery to treat epilepsy, it reduces the risk for many post-surgical complications such as infections, bleeding, speech difficulties and vision problems," Dr. Danish notes. "Many patients return home in one or two days."

Ms. Thomas has experienced no seizures since having the procedure in April. Now, she looks forward to spending quality, "worry-free" time with her 10-year-old daughter Taylor, friends and family.

"I went to Cancun recently and just sat on the beach and stared, relaxing and knowing that I wasn't going to have a seizure," she says.

Visit www.rwjuh.edu/laser-ablation or call 1-888-MD-RWJUH.

