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Stem cell therapy clinics are big business in Spokane area, but are desperate patients being sold snake oil?

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17-21 minutes

Mike Watts yearned for anything to stop the nerve damage spreading numbness throughout his left foot. The condition, called neuropathy, already cost him his construction job and put an end to the outdoor activities that defined him.

But Watts, 57, of Richland, researched the problem online and found what sounded like the perfect solution: Stem cell therapy. He caught a seminar last year in the Tri-Cities put on by Stem Cell Centers of Idaho and listened for more than an hour as Spokane-based pitchman Ed Clark praised the amazing healing power of stem cells.

“They said, ‘That’s an easy cure. We do neuropathy all the time,’ ” Watts said. “They didn’t tell me that the \$5,000 injection wasn’t going to do any good. Now I’m stuck with that debt and didn’t get nothing out of it.”

Dr. Charles Murry chairs the Institute for Stem Cell and Regenerative Medicine at the University of Washington. He’s

conducting scientific research into stem cells, which hold the promise of training older bodies to combat a wide range of diseases using their own building blocks as the cure.

And he was not surprised to learn that Watts got no benefit for his neuropathy from so-called stem cell therapy. Murry said the procedures, which are neither approved by the Federal Drug Administration nor covered by insurance or Medicare, have no basis in actual science and offer no medical benefit despite the companies' lofty promises.

"Anybody who asks you to pay for stem cell therapy right now is a charlatan," Murry said. "If they are asking you for money and it's not for a bone-marrow transplant, it's a con. It's that simple."

The FDA got a slow start in cracking down on the businesses, and they have now begun to proliferate nationwide, Murry said.

"It's like whack-a-mole. They shut down one, and two pop up someplace else," Murry said. "As long as there have been sick people, there have been a class of people who have preyed on them and this is an example of that."

But Stem Cell Centers CEO Travis Autor insists that his stem cell therapy works. He claims to have treated between 8,000 and 10,000 patients in the seven clinics he and his wife own nationwide. Autor has published dozens of testimonials by people who claim that the injections cured their COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease), knee pain, back pain, neuropathy and arthritis.

"When people get their life back, they just want to share it with people," Autor said. "Stem cells are a darn viable option. So when we have academia saying blah, blah, blah, blah, it's just not true.

These guys get a lot of press. That hurts our business.”

Defrocked chiropractor to stem cell king

Travis Autor used to be known as Travis Broughton before he agreed in 2009 to allow the state of Washington to suspend his chiropractic credentials for 10 years to settle allegations of double-billing, having sex with a patient and smoking marijuana during lunch breaks at his business in Spokane Valley.

[According to the agreement he signed](#), Broughton could have applied for reinstatement by 2016 as long as he underwent sex-offender treatment evaluation, paid a \$10,000 fine, passed two years of random drug and alcohol tests, and attended support-group meetings.

Broughton continues to claim he lost his lucrative chiropractic business based on the false accusations of an ex-girlfriend, and now, “I’ve got a big target on my back.”

[In a rambling online posting](#), Broughton explained that he changed his name to Autor “to escape this nightmare I created,” he wrote.

He claimed that he signed the agreement with the state to protect his children.

“My attorney made a deal with the state that the state would bury these allegations so they would not end up in the media if I agreed to a suspension,” Autor wrote. “Obviously either my attorney or the state lied, and that’s why you are reading this.”

In the meantime, Travis married Emily Autor and took her name. In 2014, they traveled 24 miles east and set up a chiropractic business in Coeur d’Alene.

Emily Autor, who said in an interview that she only hires staff and does not run the day-to-day business despite her title as president, said the couple took a loss that first year. Then in 2015, they changed their business name to Stem Cell Centers of Idaho after attending a seminar on stem cell therapy in Park City, Utah.

At that point, the Autors transformed their business from back adjustments to injections of hope.

“Why not go to stem cells and become the best in the country at it? We know the product works,” Autor said. “My goal is to teach people to do it right.”

Autor said the first medical doctor he hired wasn’t keen on drilling holes in people’s bones to extract marrow so that he could obtain their stem cells. Then Autor said he got a visit from a sales rep selling what he claimed to be stem cells.

“Sometimes we stumble on data that is correct before we know it’s correct,” Autor said.

Last year, the company, officially based in Post Falls with a clinic in Coeur d’Alene, grossed \$15 million in revenue from their seven stem cell clinics that are located from Florida to Arizona. The Autors say they only take 7%, or just over \$1 million, as salaries for themselves.

“When we started this from day one, we realized this was the wild, wild west of medicine,” Autor said. “It’s so brand new.”

The pitch

Clark, owner of public relations firm The Clark Company, spoke rapidly in February as a crowd of mostly older people sat in rows of

chairs in the basement of the Oxford Suites Hotel in Spokane Valley.

“How many people came here today in pain?” Clark asked as many raised their hands. “There are new medical technologies out there, like stem cells, that will take care of pain the natural way.”

The cost of this “natural way” varies from about \$5,000 up to \$17,000, depending on how much better the patients want to get, Clark said.

“Don’t get scared,” Clark said of the \$17,000 price tag. “Twenty-four units of stem cells is a huge amount of stem cells. About 79% of patients choose this plan because it gives you significant improvement. That’s the big one we offer.”

He steered the crowd, some who walked with canes and others who could not hear well, through a series of slides and testimonials of satisfied customers. Clark claimed stem cells could add three years to your life, solve any number of medical maladies and even may help erectile dysfunction.

“Here’s the word of the day: Regenerative medicine,” Clark said. “That’s what stem cells do.”

He went on to attack the health care system in the United States as supporting the “medical industrial complex.”

“How many people here think the FDA is here to help you?” he asked. “A lot of times they are not that helpful.”

He then claimed that while the FDA has not approved stem cell therapy, it has approved the labs where they purchase the stem cells.

“So, it’s not illegal,” Clark said. “They are not saying we can’t do it.

They are just saying that we are not going to pay for it.”

He then rattled off a list of things that stem cells can help, including regenerating knees. He also included asthma, bronchitis, emphysema, neck pain and neuropathy.

“We can heal nerve cells and blood cells and actually heal neuropathy,” he said. “When joints, organs or tissue are damaged, that tissue lets off little beacons, little 911 calls, that say, ‘Hey, we have a problem at the knee.’ They recruit stem cells to come to that area.”

During the question period, one woman asked whether the clinic needed a doctor’s license to do what they promised.

“Well, not necessarily,” Clark responded. “It’s an injection. It’s not brain surgery.”

He explained that a nurse practitioner, Max Holliday, works in the clinic, gives referrals for therapy and provides the injections.

“A (nurse) practitioner has almost as much training as a doctor,” Clark said. “A doctor goes to school for eight years. A nurse practitioner goes to school for six years. They really know.”

He also claimed that “80-90% of the people will respond very well to stem cell therapy.”

“It doesn’t work for everybody. But the vast super-majority of people do react to stem cells very well and are healed and satisfied with it.”

When told what Clark claimed stem cell therapy could cure, Murry, the professor, scoffed at the promises.

“What these people are proposing to do, there is no scientific evidence behind it. No third party payer (insurance or Medicare) will pay for it because they know it’s a bunch of hooey,” Murry said.

“These folks are just squirting things in and hoping for the best. It just makes the little veins in my forehead bulge out.”

Autor also criticized Clark’s presentation when he learned of the claim that a “super-majority” of patients will get better through stem cell therapy.

“He’s not authorized to say that,” Autor said of Clark, his former pitchman. “It increases sales, but it also increases people getting pissed off and wanting money back.”

Clark, in a later interview, said he just presented the information that he was given.

“I didn’t create any of that,” said Clark, who recently left the company. “I did what I was supposed to do.”

Clark was one of about 10 presenters across the country who pitch the therapies three days a week. But he maintains that the stem cell therapy he got for his knee really made his pain go away.

“I know some people who had fantastic results,” Clark said. “Does it work on everybody? No. But I’ve seen some fantastic results with different ailments.”

As part of his presentation, Clark used a clip of actor Morgan Freeman talking about the potential healing power of stem cells in an episode of “Through the Wormhole.” It was produced by Revelations Entertainment, which was co-founded by Freeman and Lori McCreary.

Reached by email, McCreary said neither Autor nor his company had obtained permission to use Freeman’s likeness to sell stem cell therapy.

“That could be,” Autor said of the failure to obtain copyright

permission. “My creative department put that together. It just gives it credibility.”

Autor said he gets about two-thirds of his clients from the seminars, like the one Clark hosted, and the rest from word-of-mouth.

“You cannot overpromise. You don’t have to oversell,” he said.

“When they don’t get better, they are pissed. But we are doing this the right way. We tell them up front that not everybody responds. But, more treatment is better.”

In his pitch, Clark said cancer and Alzheimers may be the next diseases to benefit from stem cell therapy.

“We’ve got your knee. We’ve got all your joints. We’ve got your lungs,” Clark said. “We may be able to reverse, or stop or even prevent Alzheimer’s in the coming years with stem cell therapy.”

When told of Clark’s pitch, including healing ligament and tendon injuries and regenerative face lifts, Murry, the professor, said he would give zero chance to most, if not all, of them.

When asked if stem cell therapy could prevent Alzheimer’s, Murry answered with a question: “What’s found under the south end of a north-facing bull?”

Despite a litany of warnings, the clinic’s advertisements, including several published in February in The Spokesman-Review, continue to catch clients.

John Rieger, 62, worked 36 years at Inland Empire Paper Company and suffers from horrible knee pain. He attended the seminar in Spokane Valley and thought stem cell therapy sounded interesting if it worked.

“I’m just very skeptical,” Rieger said. “If it works, it’s a great idea.

But I'm not sure I want to spend eight grand on the idea."

But Tim Sanford, 63, said he was still willing to give Autor's business a try. Sanford suffers from knee, hip and shoulder problems that may require surgery. He scheduled a consultation at Stem Cell Centers in May based on Clark's presentation.

"I've always believed in stem cells," Sanford said. "I don't worry so much about the money as long as it works. I would say other than the price, I would have been there already. It's not a scam as far as I'm concerned."

Placebo effect

During the presentation, Clark played a video of a man identified as Wayne Mitchell. He said stem cells have reduced his hip pain, got him off oxygen breathers and restored vision to his left eye.

"And the only thing I've done is get stem cell therapy," Mitchell said. "There is nothing to fear from it. Just the freedom to walk around is worth the money."

Murry, the professor, said he has no reason to doubt that people believe they are getting benefits from the injections.

"It works why? Because people are sick and desperate to get well," Murry said. "These are all anecdotes. Nobody is gathering data. We don't know what is treated or the standard of care. There's a big placebo effect. If they get a procedure done, they feel better."

Murry explained that he's been working for 20 years to make heart regeneration a reality.

"It's painstaking. You need to do it slow," Murry said. "All of us working on legitimate stem cell research are going to be painted

with the same brush. Once the public gets good and fed up and decides to tar and feather them, then they will throw us all in together.”

Autor said people like Murry complain about stem cell therapy because it will hurt their grant dollars.

“They say this should be done in a lab,” Autor said. “Institutions live on grant money. Their whole job is to create drugs and sell them to a drug company. There is an extreme conflict of interest. We’ve treated enough people to figure out the safety parameters.”

As for the lack of research, both Clark in his presentation and Autor in the interview said the company keeps meticulous records on every patient.

Autor also said he’s partnered with a physician to conduct a double-blind study with all that data so he can track trends, doses and success stories with his treatments “to make sure it’s working so we are not just stealing from patients.”

Asked the name of the physician in charge of the double-blind study, Autor replied: “Dr. Steven” before turning and inquiring to his wife. Neither could remember the doctor’s last name.

Watts, the Richland patient, said he got a call four or five months after his injection in June 2018 to treat the numbness in his foot. But they stopped calling when he told them it didn’t work.

However, Watts has heard plenty from collection agencies trying to get him to pay the \$5,000 bill, which has now increased to \$5,500 because of interest.

When he went to the clinic without any money, Stem Cell Centers had him sign paperwork to get a loan from a credit union that they

work with, he said. The interest rate was between 12% to 14% if he paid it off in two years. After that, the rate jumps to as high as 26% , he said.

“They have been bugging me to pay. I’m not working,” Watts said. “If it would have worked at all, I would be paying that bill.”

As a result of his experience with Stem Cell Centers, Watts made a formal complaint with the Idaho attorney general’s Consumer Protection Division.

“They said, ‘You’re stuck,’ ” Watts said.

If he sees another advertisement for any local seminars for the company in the Tri-Cities, Watts said he will pay them a visit.

“I was going to go out and picket and stay on the side walk with a blow horn and warn people not to get screwed over by them,” Watts said. “I should have just walked out.”

[Watch CBS’ 60 Minutes’ story about stem cell clinics](#)

Failed enforcement

Autor said he was the first local business to offer stem cell therapy. He put the number of current options between 10 and 15 clinics that now offer a version of the treatment, he said.

“The FDA is caught in a conundrum,” Autor said. “They haven’t given us clear instructions.”

But the FDA’s own website warns patients to steer clear of businesses like Autor’s.

“Stem cells have been called everything from cure-alls to miracle treatments,” according a 2017 posting on the FDA website. “But don’t believe the hype. Some unscrupulous providers offer stem cell

products that are both unapproved and unproven.”

When asked for comment about the proliferation of stem cell therapy companies, an FDA spokeswoman directed a reporter to the same [2017 warning on its website](#).

It appears, and Aitor agreed, that federal regulators have left enforcement of the clinics up to the states. [North Dakota officials made it difficult for stem cell therapy businesses to operate](#) in their state. Last year, the North Dakota attorney general forced a clinic to stop injections that aren't approved by the FDA.

Murry also provided technical advice to the Washington Legislature, [which in 2018 passed a law requiring](#) any business that offers stem cell therapy to provide written disclaimers. And they must obtain signed consent from patients before performing the therapies that are not approved by the FDA.

Earlier this month, the Washington Post [updated a story about a woman who was blinded](#) by stem cell treatments in Miami in 2015. After four years, the FDA still has not been able to shut that clinic down.

The day following the The Post story, the New York attorney general announced it had filed a lawsuit against a New York stem cell clinic over allegations that the clinic was [scamming thousands of dollars from vulnerable patients](#).

Despite all the warnings and states moving to shut the businesses down, Aitor maintains that his business is providing legitimate medical procedures that are making people better.

“Stem cells have proven to help,” he said. “They are one of the safest things we can do with a patient.”

But Murry called the therapy “fake medicine.”

“A lot of people are going to get harmed and people will get swindled out of their money,” he said. “It’s thievery.”