

BY LIN DANES

# A Miracle Job

**B**ecause of his resemblance to Old Saint Nick, he has served as a stand-in for the jolly fellow. He takes communion to residents at local nursing homes. He has been married to "his angel" for 43 years, and he has had diabetes for 25 years. He has undergone bypass surgery and survived a nine-week coma, after which he learned to walk again. And there you have it—a brief introduction to Joe Sabo, 64, who is also a patient at Summa's Lymphedema Center.

One day 12 years ago, Sabo was leisurely walking two Saint Bernards. Suddenly, the large, friendly beasts bolted. When Sabo planted his leg to keep control, the resulting trauma caused the onset of lymphedema in his left leg. During the past nine years, his lower leg has ballooned into a cumbersome, unmanageable size. He has had to suffer with the symptoms of severe lymphedema because, until recently, effective treatments were not readily available.

In June 1998, with the largest part of his affected leg measuring 71 centimeters (slightly over 30 inches), Sabo discovered Summa's Lymphedema Center, which opened in July 1997 and is located at St. Thomas Hospital. There, under the medical direction of Yasmin Heater, M.D., Sabo began receiving treatment for his lymphedema—at last.

## The Know-How to Treat Lymphedema

Summa's Lymphedema Center is one of only two physician-directed programs in Ohio. It is also one of the few

Summa's

Lymphedema Center

Provides Results



Joe Sabo, a recent patient at the center, has had lymphedema for 12 years. Pictured is his left leg prior to beginning treatment at the center.



Six days later, Joe Sabo's leg is already responding remarkably well to treatment.

healthcare facilities with the "know-how" to treat lymphedema, the accumulation of lymphatic fluid in a body compartment such as the arm, leg or trunk. It is caused by a person's lymphatic system failing to work correctly. When working properly, the lymphatic system (as part of the immune system) removes debris, bacteria and excess protein from tissues in the body. For the estimated 3 million Americans with lymphedema, this cleansing mechanism does not function.

There are two types of lymphedema. Sabo is afflicted with secondary lymphedema, which is triggered by damage to the lymphatic system. It may result from trauma, surgery, radiation, cancer, infection or scarring.

The other type, primary lymphedema, develops for no determined reason. A child may be born with it, or it may surface later in life. Primary lymphedema occurs more often in women and generally affects the legs, as is the case with Penny Knox, 30, another patient at Summa's Lymphedema Center.

"I've been fighting lymphedema since day one," says Knox, whose legs are both affected. "There was no concrete answer as to why it happened, just that I had to live with it. That's all I did—until now."

Now, Knox is well on her way to gaining control of her lymphedema. Despite the fact that she, Sabo and others must continue living with lymphedema, they can now take control of the condition—instead of letting it take control of them.

## Symptoms of Lymphedema

The condition usually begins gradually with symptoms such as:

- a "full" or heavy sensation in the limbs
- a tight feeling of the skin
- decreased flexibility in the hand, wrist, leg or ankle
- persistent swelling or difficulty fitting into clothing in one specific area

However, lymphedema often worsens. Untreated, lymphedema can cause severe pain or discomfort, poor wound healing, permanent skin changes, functional disability and cellulitis (a severe skin infection which often requires hospitalization).

"The overall goal of the center is to improve a patient's quality of life. Most of the time, that involves enhancing the use of an extremity," says Heater. "Additionally, the goal is to make the patient independent in performing self-therapy."

Because the program is physician-directed, the center provides therapy and continuous medical evaluation to ensure a safe, effective treatment plan for lymphedema patients. Heater and a team of specially trained occupational and physical therapists specialize in providing comprehensive decongestive therapy (CDT). The CDT technique originated in Europe in the 1940s, and the United States has just started integrating this treatment method into healthcare within the last three to five years.

After receiving medical approval from Heater, patients begin their individualized, painless CDT programs. While therapy is customized for each patient, all treatment plans include manual lymphatic drainage (a specialized type of massage which stimulates contraction of inactive lymphatic channels), compression bandaging (a unique

method incorporating special bandages, distinctive wrapping and applied pressure) and an exercise regimen, coupled with patient education. The compression bandaging is the key to successful management of lymphedema on a day-to-day basis.

Many of the center's patients have other physical problems. With his history of diabetes and heart problems, Sabo is such a patient. In situations like his, medical evaluation by the center's physician director is crucial. Medical management of cardiac, respiratory, non-healing wounds and other conditions continues even after therapy begins.

## Miraculous Results

After just six days of treatment, the largest portion of Sabo's lower left leg had decreased to 52.6 centimeters (slightly over 20 inches). The treatment had also helped remove more than 30 pounds of excess fluid from Sabo's body. Additionally, treatment can soften the underlying tissues, lessen heaviness, increase range of motion and function, promote wound healing and decrease the size of the affected body compartment—in Sabo's case, his leg.

"At first I thought the bandaging was uncomfortable and warm," says Sabo. "But now, from what I've seen, I think it's great. It really does the job. I can't get over the success in just six days. For the first time in years, I could wear regular trousers. I'll be able to do a lot of things now. This is a miracle job here."

"There has been a dramatic improvement compared to the way my lymphedema was when I came in," says Knox, who underwent eight weeks of treatment. "I'm able to tolerate being on my legs more. It's such a relief to know that finally somebody can help me."

Treatments average one to three weeks in duration, although more severe cases may require a commitment of six months to one year. When possible,



Denise Elsey, an occupational therapist at the center, (left) teaches Joe Sabo's wife, Nancy, how to perform compression bandaging.

instruction is provided to family members on various techniques, such as bandaging, to help with daily management of lymphedema.

Once the lymphedema reaches a point where it can be controlled, patients assume management of the condition at home. This is a two-step process. During the day, lymphedema patients must wear a custom-fitted garment to help the affected limb maintain the desired size. In the evening, patients bandage themselves, using layers of compression bandages.

"We are truly a total center," says Denise Elsey, an occupational therapist at the center. "We care about the patient and how lymphedema has affected his or her whole life."

## Want Results?

For more information about Summa's Lymphedema Center or our support group,

call (330) 379-9643.