

## 21-Year-Old Looks Forward to Pain-Free Adulthood

By John Upledger, DO, OMM

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*Author's Note:* With all that has been written about scientific research, placebo effects, double-blind studies and such, one might wonder why I didn't listen to naysayers regarding CranioSacral Therapy (CST) and other techniques long ago.

The following explains why I choose to listen to patients and their bodies, rather than to critics.

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The smile on Jo Anna Wiersma's face speaks volumes beyond her words: "I've had pain for 12 years, and now it's gone." With one look, the tall, soft-spoken 21-year-old conveys all the hope of someone given a new chance in life - the first, really, for her.

Since the age of 8, Jo Anna Wiersma had lived at the mercy of reflexive sympathetic dystrophy (RSD), a neurological syndrome brought on, in her case, from a simple fall while roller-skating. Little explanation can be offered as to why she developed a life-altering condition from such a common childhood mishap. There is little beyond "the right set of circumstances all colliding together," as she puts it.

The pain began in Jo Anna's left foot about two days after the accident. It was a deep, persistent, "on-fire" kind of pain. The orthopedic doctor thought it was a sprain and put her in an air cast for six weeks. "It's the worst thing you can do," Jo Anna said. Casting and immobilization can actually worsen the symptoms of RSD. "My skin got a silvery sheen and was blue and purple." A family friend who was a nurse practitioner recognized Jo Anna's problem for what it was and recommended a doctor in the pain management clinic where she worked. Testing at Shand's Children's Hospital in Gainesville, Fla., confirmed RSD - a condition that has no known remedy.

Jo Anna found some relief during her teen years. "I was able to be in the marching band and on the swim team," she says. Then she started college, where she tried to do too much. The RSD flared up with a

vengeance, spreading for the first time to her left hand. In a four-month span she went through seven lumbar punctures, two rhizotomies (in which the sympathetic ganglion nerves were severed), and an epidural catheter that left her paralyzed from the waist down for 11 days. That's when a friend of Jo Anna's mom recommended CST at the Upledger Institute HealthPlex Clinical Services (UI HealthPlex).

In a two-week intensive program, Jo Anna was found to have severe restrictions of her intracranial membrane system and dural tube - a compromised craniosacral system - and severe imbalances in her autonomic nervous system and myofascia. During the course of therapy, "I knew something was going on inside me," Jo Anna says. "There were times I forgot to take my methadone. And methadone is a drug that's really hard to forget because of the withdrawal symptoms and the pain that comes back." (Methadone is a powerful pain reliever that is extremely addictive; at this point, Jo Anna had been taking prescribed methadone for several years.) By the end of the intensive therapy program, Jo Anna's pain had improved enough that she was able to go back to school.

In January 2002, however, she faced another setback when she contracted encephalitis. Once again, the correct diagnosis was slow in coming. A neurologist, an infectious disease specialist and a rheumatologist all concluded that her condition was a complication of the RSD and medication. "They automatically assumed it was the RSD and was psychosomatic," Jo Anna recalls. In April, another neurologist finally confirmed the problem was encephalitis.

Jo Anna stepped up her appointments at the UI HealthPlex, coming at least twice weekly and going through another weeklong intensive program. Finally, this past December, "everything started to get better," she says. Though she readily admits it was a tough process. "There were times when I got very discouraged, wondering if this was even working. It took a good year to recover from the encephalitis, and I'm still feeling some of the effects. Especially when I'm under stress, I get very tired and the pain in my foot comes back. But I'm pain-free most days of the week now, which, actually, is a weird feeling. I honestly didn't remember life without pain."

Tad Wanveer, LMT, CST-D, worked on Jo Anna for her official "last appointment." "What a difference," he observes. "Jo Anna shows a high level of improvement and balance in the areas in which she initially presented. It's wonderful to see this courageous, intelligent, sensitive young woman able to go back and live her life," he adds.

And living life is exactly what Jo Anna is doing: "I have a lot more focus, and I'm more sure about what I want to do. One of my goals is to run a triathlon, which I would never have been able to do," she says. "I've never been able to run even a quarter of a mile. I'm also graduating from my community college and going to college in Ft. Myers [Florida] for their pre-med program." From there, she wants to attend the Kirksville College of Osteopathy.

Laughing, Jo Anna says, "I have a twin sister, and we've always been competitive. She's in Tennessee going to school. She's a chemistry major with a biology minor, and I'll be a biology major with a chemistry minor. During the summers, she works for a big pharmaceutical company, and she's been gearing all her research toward finding a cure for pain. I keep telling her, 'It's right in front of your eyes!'"

The sparkle in Jo Anna's own eyes reveals how anxious she is to prove her point. "You know, a year ago I didn't even know if I'd get this far. I didn't even know if I'd graduate with my A.A. degree," she recounts. "I look at everything as a gift. I have my life back now. And it's a lot better life than I had before."

I will never forget the last time I saw Jo Anna. She came into the clinic and said simply, "I'm all better."

"What?" I asked, somewhat surprised.

"I think I'm finished," she said. "I feel great."

Seeing that smile light up her face, I couldn't help but agree.

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