

## HEALTH

# Neurologist makes case for second epilepsy-testing bed

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THE STARPHOENIX

In what should have been his healthiest, most energetic young adult years, Tyler Wozniak lived under the careful watch of his wife and mother.

In his mid-20s, the young father's worsening epilepsy prompted 10 to 15 partial complex seizures a day. Sometimes, he would sit there, absently rubbing his wife Melanie's arm or tugging on his own sleeve. Sharing a bed with Melanie was out of the question — he would roll himself up in a cocoon of sheets, or stand up on the bed in the middle of the night.

"I couldn't be near my son when he was a baby without being supervised," Tyler says.

His protective little boy would grow up explaining his father's sometimes odd behaviour to staring strangers: "My daddy's having a seizure."

Tyler couldn't get a driver's licence. At most, the Prince Albert man could do part-time work as a janitor or a groundskeeper. Remembering nothing of any seizures, he often fell down or injured himself, fracturing bones and sustaining bruises.

"We always had our eyes on him," Melanie says.

When neurologist Dr. Jose Tellez-Zenteno saw Wozniak in a Saskatoon emergency room, he was worried.

Persistent and continuous seizures can lead to dementia, and, in some cases, sudden death.

That was five years ago. Now seizure-free, 32-year-old Wozniak drives a truck for a living.

"It's pretty much a whole new life for me," he said.

## Pinpointing seizures

A successful combination of evidence, waiting lists, and public pressure in 2008 granted Dr. Tellez's wish for a full-time bed and staff in Royal University Hospital to perform "telemetry" testing on patients with epilepsy.

Connected to electrodes on the scalp, or in some cases, right on the brain, a computer records brain activity for days while



GORD WALDNER/The StarPhoenix  
Dr. Jose Tellez-Zenteno, right, and patient Tyler Wozniak want to raise \$100,000 to purchase a second telemetry bed for Royal University Hospital.

a ceiling-mounted video camera captures the patient's behaviour. The testing, which can take up to a week, is to determine precisely where seizures are occurring in the brain, Tellez says. If the abnormal electrical pulses are all over, surgery likely won't help. But if the malfunctions are isolated to parts of the brain, surgically removing those parts is a possible cure.

Since the dedicated bed opened, 160 patients have been tested, and 52 of them went on to have brain surgery with hopes of stopping the seizures.

About 70 per cent of those patients have been seizure-free since surgery, and another eight patients have fewer seizures than before.

The problem, Tellez says, is the list of 100 patients waiting for their turn in the telemetry bed for testing. It will take at least 2½ years to work through the list, and that doesn't include Saskatchewan people who have yet to be diagnosed with epilepsy.

A second dedicated telemetry bed would help chip away at that list, he argues, which is why he and the Royal University Hospital Foundation have organized a fundraiser Monday evening to help raise the \$100,000 needed for equipment.

Alberta has 12 beds to serve 3.6 million people, and Ontario has 20 beds for 12.8 million people, but Saskatchewan has just one adult bed, Tellez points out.

Not only can the resulting surgeries dramatically improve lives like Wozniak's, it would save health care costs, Tellez argues. He points to research that found surgery on 100 patients with epilepsy can save close to \$10 million down the line in avoided ER visits and medication.

## Success when nothing else worked

Wozniak was one of those frequent ER visitors before his brain surgery in Saskatoon. A neurosurgeon removed two pieces of his brain — a Ping-Pong ball-sized piece and a grape-sized piece from the right hemisphere — which has affected his memory.

The trouble had been going on for decades, starting when he was five, his mother Linda Wozniak said. Tyler was sitting at a table colouring when he stopped and stared, looking lost.

Wozniak has endured two prior brain surgeries, one in London, Ont., and one in Edmonton. Neither worked. An implanted vagal nerve stimulator (like a pacemaker for the brain) didn't help either. He tried 10 different medications. The seizures continued unabated.

The Wozniaks could be forgiven if they didn't feel completely hopeful when Tellez wanted to try telemetry.

Five years later, the soft-spoken man still takes a handful of medications, but the seizures are gone.

After the interview, each of the Wozniaks embraced Tellez with a smile.

"We are very grateful for meeting up with Dr. Tellez," Melanie says. "We feel it was a miracle that (Tyler) was cured from the epilepsy."

After we finally knew he was seizure free, it was like — the past is all done. It's all gone. My husband has a brand-new life now. Think of all the things he can do, and the family can do. Limitations disappeared. We didn't have to watch him. We didn't have to worry about where he was going, and what he was doing. We started planning."