

## **Weaning Residents off a Ventilator, a Recurring Phenomenon in a Corner of Staten Island**

To many, when a loved one is hooked up to a ventilator, it signals a death knoll. People think it's the end of the road and they tend to give up. Patients on respirators feel they are fated to live the rest of their lives hooked to machinery and they lose their desire to live. Well, those on ventilators should not give up their fight just yet. In a leafy corner of Staten Island, straddling Brooklyn and New Jersey, there exists a bastion of hope and it's called New Vanderbilt Rehab & Care Center. In New Vanderbilt's 40 bed Ventilator and Pulmonary Care Unit, the staff takes inordinate pride in weaning the patients in their care, rehabilitating them back to normal life. In the past 8 weeks alone, 7 residents have been weaned off ventilator dependence and 5 have had their trach tub removed! That number is astounding, especially since in a normal 6 month period an average of 2 patients are usually weaned. New Vanderbilt's high success rate, twice the national average, is testimony to its outstanding ventilator care.

I was recently given a guided tour of this specialized unit by its dynamic Respiratory Director, Errol G. Cooper. Walking through the 8th floor of New Vanderbilt Rehab & Care Center, I was greeted by an array of miraculous sights and sounds; the sound of a patient talking for the first time in months, the sight of another eating her first solid meal since her arrival, and the most wondrous sight and sound of all – patients appreciating every breath that they take on their own.

Errol has been in the respiratory field for 28 years and he finds it to be a very humbling experience: "I still feel the awe of taking care of another life, it's something you never get used to. We had one recovered patient call us and say he was down in Florida playing golf! Nothing can compare to the satisfaction we felt then."

Walking through the rooms, we were not able to easily discern if a patient was on a ventilator or not. We were told that the vent equipment is purposely unobtrusive so as not to distract patients' visitors and to keep the setting from appearing hospital-like. Visiting Catherine Sanvino were her husband of 68 years and her eldest granddaughter. Since her admission to New Vanderbilt, Catherine's vent rate has been brought down to almost half! According to her granddaughter, the family is thrilled at her rate of progress and they feel she's been making strides towards recovery. Not being able to express one's self is one of the most difficult aspects when hooked to a ventilator. The New Vanderbilt does have a special machine that enables patients on ventilators to talk for short periods of time and it is used primarily when family comes to visit.

We then met Robert Fallon who just had his trach removed a day earlier and he felt like celebrating. He had become friendly with a fellow resident who recently went home – "I just got to know him and now he's no longer here!" Robert too hopes to be discharged real soon.

In New Vanderbilt's Vent Unit, a highly skilled interdisciplinary team of caregivers focus on restoring maximum function and independence to pulmonary compromised patients. Once a resident is off the ventilator, the next step is to remove the trach tube and then they concentrate on strengthening and reconditioning through a program of decannulation and progressive rehabilitation. Pulmonologists Dr. Vincent Tarantola and Dr. Phillip Cosentino, are regulars on the 8th floor, as they make their rounds 5 days a week.

Yes, optimism does have its place in New Vanderbilt. In Errol's words: "We've had tremendous success, with God's help."