

Doctor for Kosar uses disputed detox care

'Rapid' method called safe by supporters but risky by critics

SARAH JANE TRIBBLE
Plain Dealer Reporter

Rick Sponaugle entered the national spotlight last month when former Cleveland Browns quarterback Bernie Kosar said the doctor had cured him.

Twelve years in the NFL and multiple concussions had left Kosar with headaches, insomnia and slurred speech.

He said that after he visited Sponaugle's clinic, those symptoms were gone.

But the Florida doctor isn't certified in neurology.

His résumé says he's board certified in anesthesiology and addiction, and for more than a decade, the 57-year-old specialized in a controversial treatment known as "rapid detox."

The treatment involves placing patients under anesthesia for hours while they are given drugs to aid what is normally a painful withdrawal.

"You can learn to do anything regardless of your training," Sponaugle said in an interview. "You've got a brain, you have a passion and you want to learn."

An estimated 40 million adults — or 16 percent of the American population — suffer from addiction, and there is rising concern about a lack of standard of care, according to a 2012 report by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University.

"Addiction treatment is largely disconnected from mainstream medical practice," said Susan Foster, director of policy research and analysis at the center.

The five-year study evaluated the disease as well as the types of care provided to patients. Foster called addiction a "complex brain disease" and said that few people who suffer from addiction receive evidence-based care, or treatment based on research that supports the safety and efficacy of the work.

Rather than supporting a multi-day detox treatment or the widely known 30-day inpatient stint, the report recommends approach-



Sponaugle

Peer and social support and, in some cases, the use of prescription drugs may also be needed.

The study concluded that "addiction treatment facilities and programs are not adequately regulated or held accountable for providing treatment that is consistent with medical standards."

Media reports, government memos as well as court documents provide a window into the evolution of Sponaugle's practice, his treatments and his patients.

"The Ricki Lake Show" followed four teenagers in 2000 as they underwent rapid detoxification at the nonprofit Helen Ellis Memorial Hospital, where Sponaugle worked as chief of anesthesiology from 1986 to 2005. Each teen was put under an anesthetic for four to six hours and received medications that blocked the symptoms of their heroin withdrawal, according to the St. Petersburg Times. Afterward, they attended therapy sessions.

In 2003, Media General News Service distributed a story about Florida Detox, Sponaugle's clinic, that said a phone call from a doctor in California "got Sponaugle started in the field of drug addiction." Sponaugle opened a rapid addiction treatment franchise.

"The seven-member staff, three of whom are former patients," the story stated, "is made up of evangelical Christians who consider Florida Detox to be their spiritual mission."

The story said that Sponaugle told his patients Bible stories about the possibility of redemption.

Sponaugle said in an interview that he still talks with patients about the Bible and said he prayed before beginning Kosar's treatment.

"I prayed for supernatural wisdom," Sponaugle said.

Sponaugle built his addiction treatment practice using his offices at Helen Ellis hospital as a base. He drew the attention of CNN's Anderson Cooper and popular daytime talk-show host Dr. Phil McGraw, who featured Florida Detox patients on their shows. Dr. Phil recommended Sponaugle and his treatment to his viewers.

Proponents of rapid detox say it is safe and quickly cleanses an addict's body with less pain than traditional detox, which often involves months of weaning off the substance and therapy.

Its many critics say rapid detox is a sometimes deadly procedure that has little proof of long-term success.

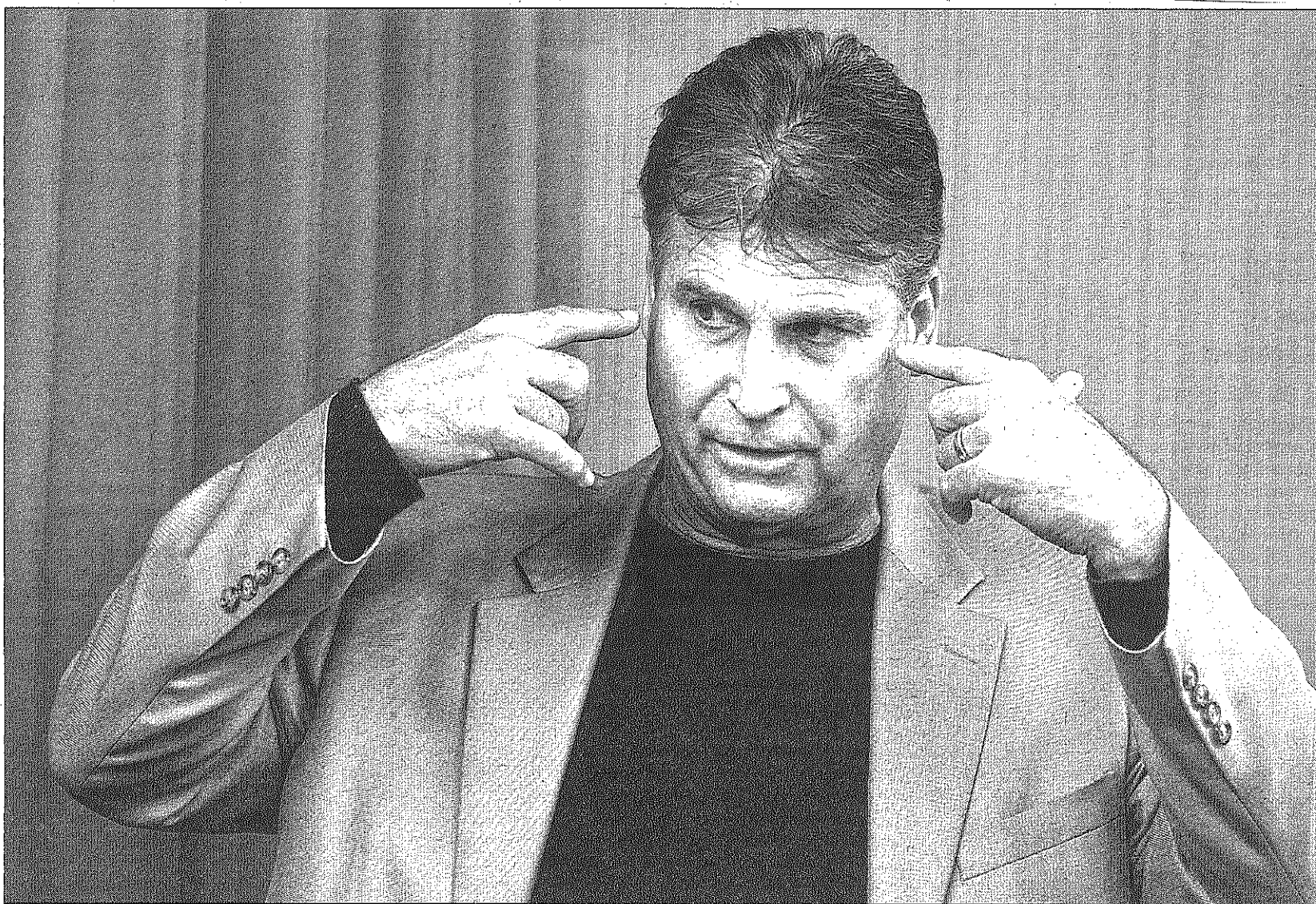
William Denihan, chief executive of the Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services Board of Cuyahoga County, said that recovering from an addiction is a long road and not something that can be achieved by several days of detox.

"It really doesn't set up a person for recovery," he said, adding that he did not know of any accredited center in Northeast Ohio that performed the treatment.

Chris Adelman, medical director of Rosary Hall, Northeast Ohio's only hospital-based treatment facility for drug addiction, called the practice "very dangerous" and said rapid detox "is not any kind of procedure that is standard."

Dr. Westley Clark, director of the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment with the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or SAMHSA, said anesthesia-assisted detox was pioneered in the 1980s but in 2000, many experts in addiction still considered the treatment "experimental."

"It's not illegal, although



JOSHUA GUNTER / THE PLAIN DEALER

Rick Sponaugle, doctor to former Browns quarterback Bernie Kosar, discusses brain injury and treatment on Jan. 10, in Middleburg Heights. The Florida doctor isn't certified in neurology, but his résumé says he's board certified in anesthesiology and addiction, and he has specialized in a controversial treatment known as "rapid detox."

some [state] medical boards [have] called it into question and a number of people withdrew from it as a strategy," Clark said.

Columbia's Foster said rapid detox is not considered an "evidence-based treatment."

"To the contrary," she said, "There is some evidence to support that it is expensive and dangerous."

JAMA, the peer-reviewed Journal of the American Medical Association, published a paper in 2005 questioning the practice after researchers at Columbia University conducted a study to determine how using general anesthesia for addiction compared with other treatments. They followed more than 100 treatment-seeking, heroin-dependent patients for 12 weeks between 2000 and 2003.

Three participants in the anesthesia-assisted detox study faced life-threatening events: One experienced fluid accumulation in the lungs and pneumonia; another had a mixed-state bipolar episode of both mania and depression that required hospitalization; and a third experienced an episode of diabetic ketoacidosis, in which the patient's body has a dangerous shortage of insulin.

The researchers criticized the treatment as offering "false promise that anesthesia eliminates the severe discomfort of opioid withdrawal." They also said the practice was costly and posed a risk of death.

In a medical malpractice lawsuit filed against Sponaugle, court exhibits show that the doctor's standard rapid detox protocol for his patients included the use of drugs called naltrexone and propofol, also marketed as Diprivan, among other medications. Propofol is the drug that came to national attention by playing a role in singer Michael Jackson's overdose death. Naltrexone is an oral drug used to counteract the effects of narcotics.

Video testimonials from patients on Sponaugle's website and comments posted in online chat rooms praise the doctor.

"I owe the rest of my life to Dr. Sponaugle," one commenter posted in May 2011 on the online consumer rating site RateMDs.com. "He cleaned me out and restored my body to its

original state."

The world of rapid detox is a small and competitive industry in which patients are willing to travel for treatment.

In 2011, New Jersey-based Addiction & Detoxification Institute filed a patent infringement claim in federal court alleging that Sponaugle was infringing on the practice "using, offering to sell, and/or selling methods and services that practice one or more inventions" of the institute and that he profited by doing so.

Sponaugle denied the company's allegations of infringement, stating in a February 2012 filing that he "lacked knowledge" of the patents. In December, the institute voluntarily dismissed the case with a confidential settlement agreement, according to a filing in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois.

The patents in question list treatment medications propofol and naltrexone, both drugs that were listed in court exhibits as part of Sponaugle's standard protocol.

Advertisements for Sponaugle's addiction treatment promised, "Our patients do not experience the painful withdrawal symptoms."

One pamphlet included in exhibits from a medical malpractice lawsuit says that Florida Detox uses medicine during anesthesia that blocks the opiate receptors in the brain. It also provides an explanation of why the brain operates as it does and said that "medical follow up and treatment of brain chemistry issues is provided for three months after detoxification."

About the same time, a Florida prosecutor touted Sponaugle's program as a possible cost-saving means of detox for state prisoners.

"Florida Detox provides a medically approved anesthesia assisted detoxification procedure that is 100 percent effective," John Tanner, formerly of Florida's 7th Judicial Court, wrote in a 2003 letter to a state attorney in a different jurisdiction. He suggested that at a cost of \$11,000 per case, Sponaugle's program could save the state money.

There is no record of the state

contracting with Sponaugle, and Tanner is no longer a state attorney.

By 2003, Sponaugle was admitting 400 to 500 patients a year to Helen Ellis in Tarpon Springs for rapid detox, according to his deposition in a court case.

Sponaugle's business continued to grow, so quickly that one executive at Helen Ellis, where Sponaugle was on contract but not employed, stated in a deposition in a malpractice suit that the hospital leased a newly designed suite of offices to the doctor in 2005 because of "a number of patients' families that would just linger in the hallways, sometimes sleeping all over the hallways, and it was actually not a very good image for the hospital."

Sponaugle rented 1,910 square feet at \$3,342.50 a month for three years. And the hospital continued to dedicate staff to his detox unit, according to court documents.

In 2009, Sponaugle and his wife, Kimberly, spent \$2.5 million at an auction to buy a historic Georgia plantation. The property, which is nine miles north of the Georgia state line in Thomasville, included 20 buildings on 37 acres. The couple told a reporter for Florida's Tallahassee Democrat that they hoped to open another location for their addiction treatments.

Sponaugle said during recent interviews that there have been a number of delays in opening the Georgia facility, including not being able to find doctors to help him expand his business.

Nationwide, no national licensing standards exist for who can treat addiction or how it is provided, said Foster, of Columbia University's National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse. She said the center's five-year review of how addiction is treated in the United States found a "separate and unrelated system of care." She said the report encourages "the medical profession to educate itself and to intervene."

Currently, standards of care for addiction treatment vary by state and payer, Foster said.

As a medical doctor, Sponaugle has a license with the Florida Department of Health, and

he has no public complaints or disciplinary actions against him on record.

Sponaugle, along with Helen Ellis hospital, has been named a defendant in four medical malpractice suits, according to Florida's Pinellas County court docket.

Executives at Helen Ellis, which was purchased in 2010 and has changed its name to Florida Hospital North Pinellas, declined to comment on the lawsuits.

Last week, Sponaugle called the cases "nuisance suits." One remains open, one was dropped and the two others were settled because, Sponaugle said, "they are not worth fighting."

"I've had no legitimate suits against me but I've dealt with a lot of psychopaths, sociopaths," he said in a voicemail message left at The Plain Dealer.

Medical malpractice suits are common for doctors, according to a 2010 report by the American Medical Association. On average 42 percent of doctors reported ever being sued, and more than 22 percent said they had been sued more than twice in their careers, according to the report.

In May 2007, Sharon Johnson filed suit against Sponaugle and Helen Ellis alleging a "negligent deviation from the standard of care" during her January 2006 detox treatment for a 10 milligrams-a-day addiction to the painkiller Oxycontin.

The initial complaint alleges negligence including "recommending the detox procedure," "failure to routinely move Johnson while under anesthesia to prevent nerve damage," and "creating a medical record far after the occurrence which is not supported by, and contradictory to, prior medical history."

In a 2008 response and opposition filing, Sponaugle's attorneys stated that Johnson underwent 45 minutes of detoxification and was then moved to intensive care. They said there was evidence of a "dropped foot," a foot that was painful and difficult to pick up because of nerve damage. Johnson underwent physical therapy and was able to bear weight on the foot by the time of her discharge a month later, they said.

Ten months after her treatment, Johnson "had fully recovered

her leg strength," according to the filing.

In a deposition for the case, Sponaugle confirmed that he put Johnson back on pain medication after complications occurred during the procedure.

"I essentially became a management doctor, to the reverse route," he said. The case was set for jury Nov. 14, 2011. It was scheduled to start a week earlier.

A case that is still ongoing involves an Atlanta couple who allege that Sponaugle's rapid detox treatment caused their daughter's brain injury.

John Westerfield filed a lawsuit for treatment from Sponaugle in 2004, and filed a lawsuit in January 2007 alleging that Sponaugle's negligence alleged here caused deviations from the accepted standard of professional care alleged herein, Plaintiff Westerfield, suffered a permanent anoxic brain injury.

Sponaugle's attorney responded, denying the allegations and asserting that the care provided by Sponaugle "not causative of any injury now complained of" by Westerfield. In a 2008 deposition, Sponaugle stated that the injury to Westerfield's brain from a drug overdose that happened after his treatment.

Separate from the brain injury that was the subject of the lawsuit, Sponaugle said that Westerfield's brain was already damaged.

"I suggest that if we look at Westerfield, we'll find beyond any chemical issue, probably find damage to the lateral temporal lobes, where the memory center is in the temporal lobes, hippocampus to be exact," Sponaugle said. "And just based on the evidence that I have gained in the science and seeing the scans of patients in the past, et cetera, and patients that have had brain trauma we don't have."

Plain Dealer researcher J. Corrigan contributed to this report.

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter, contact Corrigan at 216-999-3333 or on Twitter: @sitribble.