

Seeing the Light

How light
therapy is surprising
skeptics and gaining converts

by Rich Smith



Kathy Tisko, PT, and Luko Arnett, DC, use light therapy in their respective practices.

Once he saw the light, a 59-year-old Texan became a changed man. Not emotionally or spiritually, but physically. The man was a patient at Park Cities Physical Therapy in Dallas, suffering from right upper extremity reflex sympathetic dystrophy. A diabetic with heart disease, he'd developed complex regional pain syndrome after a surgical procedure that compromised circulation in his forearm and hand.

"His right arm possessed no strength; he couldn't raise it or use it at all," recalls Park Cities owner Kathy Tisko, PT. "He couldn't perform finger-thumb opposition or finger flexion, which left him incapable of grasping objects. In fact, he had a certain amount of finger-muscle atrophy—clawing deformity. There was pain, too, in his hand and on the right side of his neck and shoulder."

Tisko opted to treat him (in part) with a modality that promotes rehabilitation through the emission of photons (light energy) aimed at affected tissues and muscle. On the first visit to Park Cities, Tisko used this modality to irradiate the man's cervical nerve roots as well as the thumb and fingers of his disabled hand. While that was occurring, Tisko helped him perform a brief flexion-improving exercise or two. At the end of the visit, the man's grip strength in his right hand

measured 5 lbs, as compared to his normal left-hand grip of 65 lbs.

Light therapy (sometimes referred to as low-level laser therapy depending on the device being used) was again performed during the subsequent visit some days later. At the conclusion of the session (which involved a broader set of strengthening exercises), the man could elevate his arm above his shoulder and reported a significant decrease in neck and shoulder pain. By the eighth visit's end, the man was able to button his shirt and, with a grip strength of 20 lbs, execute a solid handshake.

"The improvements within so short a time were astounding," says Tisko. Unfortunately, his insurance covered him for just those eight visits. Tisko is reasonably sure the man would have continued making gains had the payor allowed further treatment. Nevertheless, for Tisko the case demonstrated once more the power of light to heal.

Healed in a Flash

By Tisko's rough tally, hundreds of studies thus far have been conducted to explore and explain how light at wavelengths between 600 nm and 1,000 nm (the slice of the spectrum that includes both