Lung function improved with new treatment

A revolutionary procedure is drastically improving the lives of patients with advanced emphysema. In February 2015, respiratory physician Dr Nick Wilsmore performed the first bronchoscopic lung volume reduction (BLVR) at Epworth Eastern.

Used in the treatment of advanced emphysema, BLVR involves the insertion of one-way valves into the airways, allowing gas and mucous to exit the targeted area of the lungs, and preventing the re-entry of air into the targeted segment.

Worldwide, the procedure has been performed on more than 10,000 patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) patients, and has an 80 per cent success rate in patients with severe emphysema detected on CT scans and evidence of hyperinflation on lung volumes. The surgery takes around 15 minutes to complete.

Emphysema sufferer Colleen Allan underwent surgery with Dr Wilsmore in June, and says it’s in carrying out her everyday activities that she’s noticed the biggest difference.

“I had awful trouble sleeping and terrible trouble showering — I used to get in and out of the shower as quickly as I could — so those have been two of the main improvements,” says Colleen, whose struggle with breathlessness made daily living a challenge.

“Trying to turn over in bed used to be an issue, but I don’t approach that with fear anymore. I’m now breathing much easier in bed and sleeping like a baby.

“I had an ongoing discomfort in my midriff,” adds Colleen, “and that’s completely disappeared since the procedure.”

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It is estimated that in Australia 7.5 per cent of adults over 40 have COPD that affects their quality of life, and up to 29 per cent of adults over the age of 75. It is the second leading cause of hospitalisation in our community, and one of the leading causes of death and disease burden.

“The procedure can be very successful, and lead to significant and prolonged improvements in patients’ lung function, levels of breathlessness and quality of life,” explains Dr Wilsmore.

“With regards to Colleen, she was severely impaired in terms of lung function, with her capacity reduced down to 27 per cent. Quality of life, in terms of even the simplest of activities, was significantly impaired. The procedure was very straightforward, with three valves inserted over a 20-minute period. Recovery was uncomplicated, and at the one-month mark, Colleen had already noted a life-changing level of improvement in breathlessness and quality of life. In these cases, we can expect improvements in lung function of up to 40 per cent with the best responders.”