

HEALTH

Former 'club drug' now being used to treat pain, depression

Local doctor among those who believe in ketamine's healing powers

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By the time patients find their way to the Camarillo office of Dr. Stefany Wolfsohn, the physician says, they're often in tears—at their wits' end after all traditional treatments for depression, pain and other chronic conditions have failed.

Wolfsohn offers them hope. At the Ventura Center for Advanced Therapeutics, the doctor performs low-dose intravenous infusions of ketamine to treat patients with treatment-resistant depression, chronic pain, PTSD and chronic migraines. The treatments are administered in a peaceful setting with upholstered recliners, fuzzy blankets, aromatherapy and soothing music to make the patients as comfortable as possible.

"Patients come here after they've tried everything and there's nothing else left for them," she said. "This is the Zen zone."

'THE ZEN ZONE'—Camarillo-based physician Stefany Wolfsohn said she's seen ketamine infusion treatments change people's lives. "It's been amazing to watch," she says.

Patients receive low doses of the drug through controlled pumps while hooked up to monitors to ensure safety.

Wolfsohn, a Camarillo native who graduated from La Reina High School, UC Riverside, Universidad Autonoma de Guadala-

jara in Mexico and New York Medical College, said ketamine can be an alternative for opiate-based medications. She works in partnership with patients' psychotherapists, occupational therapists and physical therapists to treat the whole patient.

While Wolfsohn is a board-certified anesthesiologist, she said the success she has had using ketamine to treat pain and depression inspired her to expand her practice beyond surgical anesthesia.

"This has been an even greater love," she said. "This was my heart."

Ketamine was developed as an anesthetic and pain reliever in the 1960s and was used to treat injured soldiers during the Vietnam War. It is also used in veterinary medicine.

The dissociative drug produces psychedelic effects in high doses—on the street it goes by the name "Special K"—and its abuse as a "club drug" led to it being classified as a controlled substance in the United States.

But doctors continued to use it

during general anesthesia applications, in critical care medicine and for palliative care.

The use of ketamine to treat depression has largely been "off label," meaning depression is not a condition for which the drug had been approved. But in March this year, the Food and Drug Administration approved a ketamine nasal spray, Spravato, to treat depression.

Wolfsohn began administering ketamine in 2003 while working at the Arizona Burn Center, where she used it to provide relief to burn patients during the painful process of changing wound bandages.

Once she entered private practice more than a decade ago working alongside her father, anesthesiologist Dr. Marc Wolfsohn, she began using ketamine alongside other drugs to sedate patients for surgery and other procedures.

She said she saw the therapeutic potential of the drug when patients would wake up from the anesthesia and report feeling good. The use of ketamine as part of an anesthetic can decrease the overall requirement of opiates to treat postoperative pain, Wolfsohn said.

Bonni Latag is Wolfsohn's medical assistant. She said she's seen ketamine infusion treatments change people's lives.

"I have seen patients come in that can't function and they leave and come back as a happier person," she said.

The positive effects of ketamine can last for as long as six weeks, Wolfsohn said.

Heather Kawai is a spokesperson for Wolfsohn. She said she's seen ketamine infusions give people instant relief from their symptoms long enough to give traditional treatments, like antidepressants, therapy and exercise, a chance to take effect.

"With antidepressants, you don't even know if it's going to work or not for six weeks, which when you're depressed is like 100 years," she said. "This can help you help yourself."

Wolfsohn said the treatment provides relief from pain and depression long enough to "create an opportunity for patients to reinforce positive behaviors."

The physician also offers ketamine-assisted psychotherapy, where patients speak to their therapist during an infusion treatment in her office. Because ketamine produces a state where the mind is dissociated from the body, Wolfsohn said, it can provide an opportunity to work through memories that would otherwise be too painful to revisit.

"It's been amazing to watch," she said.

For that reason, ketamine also offers hope for military service members suffering from PTSD. Wolfsohn is beginning to use the treatment to help service members from Naval Base Ventura County.

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