

The freedom to walk again

The impressive story of Maria Bordonado, a victim of elephantiasis

When the Spaniard Maria Bordonado arrived at the Lympho-Opt Klinik in Hohenstadt near Nuremberg, Germany, for the first time, she needed several helpers to lift her out of the ambulance. She could hardly move due to her elephantiasis, the most severe form of lymphoedema. Her right calf alone had a circumference of 1.59 metres. That was in January 1999. She stayed at the clinic for six months. Thanks to the consistent treatment and the return transport of lymph fluid that this achieved, she lost more than 86 kilogrammes from her legs alone.

She returned to Franconia in the spring of 2014 for the third time. She came for follow-up treatment – this time, she travelled by air and without any help from others. Dr Franz-Josef Schingale has known and been treating Maria for 15 years. He was not only satisfied with his patient's condition, but he was also deeply impressed by her iron self-discipline. "Maria was last here as an inpatient at our clinic in 2006. It is fantastic how she has maintained the outcome of treatment since then. Over the last eight years, she has only accumulated 1.7 litres of fluid in her left leg. The right leg has stayed just as it was. When one considers that she has no manual lymphatic drainage at home in Spain, that she bandages herself and treats herself with automatic intermittent compression (treatment with pressure cuffs) and compression stockings, she is in wonderful condition".



Dr Franz-Josef Schingale, Medical Director of the Lympho-Opt Klinik in Hohenstadt.



The smile's back – Maria Bordonado during her most recent stay at the Lympho-Opt Klinik last March.

Bed-ridden for ten years

However Maria, who is now 48 years old, had toiled along an arduous path for decades until she achieved this positive diagnosis. The first symptoms of lymphoedema started shortly after her first communion at the age of nine. Maria Bordonado remembers: "My feet and knees kept growing thicker and thicker. None of my shoes fitted me anymore. At first I thought nothing of it and my parents believed it would pass". But the swelling got worse instead of better.

Maria's parents consulted their family doctor. However, he could not help her and thus began Maria's odyssey around innumerable doctors' practices over many years. Nobody could offer her a solution. While her friends

Recommended video clip

The report on Maria Bordonado and her medical history can be downloaded free of charge from medi's mediathek at videoclips.medi.de



finished school, found a job and started families, Maria's lymphoedema confined her to her bed. For more than ten years, her living space was restricted to the bedroom and the bathroom. With those legs, she could not walk any further than that. It took too much effort. She also dreaded the looks she was given in public. The only social contact she had was with her family, who comforted her and offered her support over the long years.

Help in Franconia, Germany

The turn for the better happened in 1998, when a Spanish doctor published

Maria's medical history on the Internet. This brought Maria's plight to the attention of Nati Velázquez, manager of medi's Spanish group company. Nati got in touch with Dr Schingale, Medical Director at the Lympho-Opt Klinik. He was confident that Maria could be helped. However, there was another obstacle: the Spanish health insurers refused to pay the cost of treatment. As soon as medi's employees and management heard the story, they spontaneously decided to help. The budget that had been allocated for the yearly customers' Christmas gifts was

promptly diverted for Maria's treatment. The general public also provided a financial boost. A number of German TV channels reported on Maria's affliction and called for donations to enable her to have treatment in Franconia. By the end of January 1999, everything was in place. Maria was transported, lying down, by ambulance for about 2,000 kilometres from her home near Alicante to Hohenstadt. Complex physical decongestion therapy, a tried and tested form of treatment for lymphoedema, commenced. After six months of daily lymphatic drainage,



Intermittent compression systems (ICS) are an essential element of treatment. The machines alternately inflate and deflate plenum chambers in the cuffs to generate a previously defined intermittent therapeutic pressure. The alternating pressure changes simulate the natural muscle pump and supports the work of the veins and lymph vessels. Oedema is decongested and venous and lymphatic return is promoted in the long term.

automatic intermittent compression, mobilisation treatment and compression garments, the ambitious target was reached. Maria was able to walk again. The circumference of her right calf alone had been reduced from 1.59 metres to 52 centimetres. This was her new start in life.

Successful treatment thanks to networking

Such an excellent result can only be achieved by the highest level of interaction between doctors, therapists and surgical appliance experts. A doctor alone is not enough for adequate patient care. Because: “Although we do look at lymph nodes during medical training, they are teaching less and less about lymph vessels these days”, says Dr Schingale.

So it is no surprise that there are only about 450 doctors in this country who concern themselves with lymphology. “These doctors are able to diagnose disorders of the lymphatic system, but trained therapists are needed for further treatment, for example, for manual lymphatic drainage and subsequent bandaging. We also need surgical appliance experts, who measure patients for compression garments accurately and at exactly the right time”, says Dr Schingale. Successful treatment is only possible if all this and many other factors are fulfilled. Thus, a smooth and continuous interaction between the lymph experts involved is essential.

Although there is still room for expansion with regard to this network



Manual lymphatic drainage is an essential element of complex physical decongestion therapy. Maria Bordonado with the therapist Sebastian Wagner.



In 1998, the circumference of her right calf alone was 1.59 metres.



In 2014, her calf circumference is 35 centimetres. Maria Bordonado with medi compression hosiery.

in Germany and there are too few experts in all the areas mentioned, an international comparison shows that Germany occupies a leading position in caring for patients with lymphoedema. Maria Bordonado can confirm this. She and the other patients at the Lympho-Opt Klinik benefit from such a network.

After Maria had lost almost two litres of lymph fluid through manual lymphatic drainage, she was measured again towards the end of this year’s stay. The lymph expert Cornelia Wilhelm from the neighbouring surgical appliance retailer ‘Coframed Gesundheitstreff im PEZ’ once again took the measurements, just as she did 15 years ago. She too was impressed by Maria’s condition. “Her calves have become really slim. This is where her discipline and her active cooperation in treatment have genuinely paid off”. To make sure that her present condition is maintained for as long as possible, Maria was fitted with multi-part garments consisting of toe caps, thigh-length stockings and Capri shorts from



Maria Bordonado doing exercises with the therapist Sebastian Wagner.



They can be proud of their joint success: Dr Schingale and Maria Bordonado.

medi. This double garment at the thigh and over the backs of her feet guarantees stronger pressure and offers higher wall stability. Such garments are particularly useful for patients with pronounced lymphoedema. Furthermore, donning and doffing in everyday life is also made easier by the division of the hosiery into several segments.

Maria's prospects are very bright

Is it now enough for Maria to treat herself at home and come to Germany every few years for follow-up treatment? "The original idea was to keep treating her intensively until she reaches a ripe old age. But I can now rethink that", says Dr Schingale. "We have many patients, who can maintain their treatment results with consistent self-treatment. Compression is a very important element. It is the most significant pillar of treatment", the medic continued. He has no concerns that Maria might develop elephantiasis again. "In view of her current condition, the intervals between her visits to us

are adequate in relation to the result. And Maria is so highly motivated that I can assume that she is able to carry on living normally for the next four to five years. If anyone can manage it, she can".



Proper measurements call for experts.