

X-treme Results

Dr. Titus Duncan Merging Bariatrics, Technology and Education

By Helen K. Kelley

Many overweight people are seeking that “magic bullet” for weight loss—a pill or procedure that will magically melt away the pounds for good. While no such prescription exists as yet, thousands of obese people are lining up for bariatric surgeries that seem to be the closest thing to a miracle cure available today.

However, surgery is only one of the keys to successful permanent weight loss, according to Dr. Titus D. Duncan, a general surgeon in practice with Peachtree Surgical Associates and director of the innovative Weight Loss Program at Atlanta Medical Center (AMC).

“One of the reasons our program is unique is that we view bariatric surgery as only a small part of the whole weight loss process,” explains Duncan. “The surgery is like a set of ‘training wheels’ that we use to

help our patients while we’re teaching them to modify their habits and, in fact, their entire lifestyle.”

Other keys to Duncan’s total weight loss program include nutritional counseling from a registered dietitian, a fitness program designed by an exercise physiologist, psychological evaluation and counseling, and pre- and post-operative seminars and programs.

Susan Cali, RN, who serves as director of the Wellness Center and Bariatric Services at Atlanta Medical Center, says that simply having surgery will not ensure successful weight loss.

“The surgery is a choice, but it’s only one tool for effective weight loss,” she explains. “We want our patients to understand the limitations they will have after the surgery and how to deal with those limitations.

Karen Lamkin, MS, RD, LD, holds a test tube showing the amount of fat in a McDonald’s sausage biscuit. Verdict: 30 grams. Showing, not just telling, patients about the fat content of foods is one step in Dr. Duncan’s highly successful, comprehensive weight loss treatment program.

PHOTO BY LELAND HOLDER





Dr. Duncan talking with Susan Cali, director of the Wellness Center, and Adam Smart, surgical technician.

Voice-Activated Operating Room Suites Allow for Better Control, Efficiency

Dr. Duncan performs bariatric surgeries in a computer-controlled operating room—the voice-activated system allows him to maneuver a camera, lighting, operating table and various instruments simply by speaking a command.

"This particular surgery is one of the most difficult laparoscopic surgeries to perform," notes Duncan. "So, in this O.R., I have the highest quality, technically advanced instruments available. It makes the operation smoother for me, and much safer for the patient."

The system has improved the efficiency, quality and accuracy of the surgery by allowing the physician to pull up a variety of tests and screens that the patient has had from virtually any modality—CT scans, X-rays, upper GI series, etc.

The computer system is also connected to a classroom, where graduate medical students can observe Duncan as he performs surgeries. The surgery can also be transmitted to other medical facilities around the country, where physicians can ask questions while Duncan is doing a procedure.

"We do a lot of teaching," says Duncan. "Surgeons can actually come here and observe us doing the procedure, and emulate it when they go back to their own facilities. They can also dial in here and ask questions if they have a problem when they begin surgeries at their hospitals. Or, I can actually watch them do a surgical procedure via remote and instruct them."

Our commitment is to our patients' success, and we show that commitment through our multi-faceted program."

GETTING FROM POINT A TO POINT B

Once a prospective patient inquires about the Surgical Weight Loss Center's program, he or she is asked to attend an orientation class conducted by Dr. Duncan. The class gives a general overview of obesity, the bariatric surgery and its risks, qualifications for bariatric surgery, and required lifestyle changes. The patients are then given a packet to take home to complete on their medical history.

Once the medical history is received, Dr. Duncan reviews it and determines if the patient qualifies for surgery, based on height, weight and co-morbidities. (Currently, patients that qualify for surgery under the National Institutes of Health guidelines can have a BMI [body mass index] of greater than 35 with co-morbidities, or greater than 40 without co-morbidities.) If the patient qualifies for surgery, he or she will come back to the Center for a physical, and that information will be submitted to the patient's insurance company, along with any other tests the company requires.

The patient also receives a nutritional and exercise consultation and undergoes a psychological evaluation. Once a patient has been determined medically and psychologically stable and insurance approval is obtained, the surgery can be scheduled. Patients are then asked to at-



Exercise therapist Keva Strowbridge making a point to Robert Surillo, who has lost 90 pounds during Dr. Duncan's weight loss treatment program.

tend a two-hour pre-op class on nutrition and exercise, conducted by Karen Lamkin, MS, RD, LD, and Keva Strowbridge, BSK.

"My role is to teach my patients how to maintain their nutritional health following the surgery, given the fact that they're not going to be eating much food. They need to eat nutritiously and take certain supplements, among other things," says Lamkin. "I stress the importance of the different aspects of maintaining their nutritional health and follow up with them before and after the surgery."

Strowbridge conducts an initial exercise assessment that determines the patient's fitness level and then creates a customized exercise program. "I monitor our patients throughout their exercise programs, and I also do follow-up exercise consulting, stressing the need for behavior and lifestyle changes," she says. "Because most of these patients have not exercised in the past, I encourage them to think more positively about increasing their physical activity and emphasize that this is a huge part of their surgery—another tool to ensure their success post-operatively."

The surgical procedure performed on the patient by Dr. Duncan is *Roux En-Y*, which is considered the "gold standard" in bariatrics. The surgery combines a restrictive procedure with a malabsorption procedure, and is done laparoscopically, which minimizes the risk of infection. More than 600 of these surgeries have been performed at Atlanta Medical Center since September 2002.

After the surgery, patients are scheduled for follow-up consultations, nutritional advice and exercise programs. AMC's Wellness Center boasts a hospital-based wellness center, the Highland Athletic Club, where patients can work out on equipment designed especially for them. And for patients who live too far away to come in to the athletic club, Strowbridge will design an at-home exercise program.

Because there are ways for a patient to cheat and "out-eat" the surgery, Duncan stresses the importance of following through on all areas of the program for a successful, long-term weight loss.

"We have to address the patient's psychological issues to determine why that person overeats. For example, if we perform the surgery on a person who overeats due to job-related stress and we put them right

back into that job afterward without giving them the tools to battle that stress, we haven't changed a thing," he says. "We also have to address nutritional issues. Say, if a patient lives in a neighborhood surrounded by fast food restaurants, and we put him or her right back into that environment post-op without the benefit of sound nutritional principles, the effort will fail."

Patients also have to be educated about the value of exercise and the difference between weight loss and reduction of body fat. "Most people have spent a lifetime getting on a scale. But the only thing a scale measures is body weight; it doesn't measure body fat," notes Duncan. "Obesity is a disease of body fat, not a disease of weight. So, with our exercise physiologist, we emphasize that losing fat is the real issue. Without exercise, the program doesn't work."

THE IMPACT OF OBESITY ON THE COMMUNITY

There are many outside factors that contribute to the rising numbers of obese people in our community today, including low or reduced incomes, lack of insurance coverage, a proliferation of inexpensive fast-food restaurants and indoor activities, such as television and computers, that entice people to stay away from exercise. Particularly alarming are the increasing numbers of children under 18 who, due to their weight, are experiencing adult health problems like hypertension, cardiac disease and diabetes.

A concerned Duncan has set about doing what he can to change the mindset of the public when it comes to preventing obesity. "Our main emphasis and our main goal is primarily the community and preventive measures. For example, I'm working on scheduling a meeting with Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin about a successful program in Houston, TX, called 'Get Lean Houston,' which combines exercise and a sound diet—we'd like to start that same kind of program here," he says. "Nothing can be accomplished without education. We need to initiate legislation for getting fast foods and soft drinks out of the schools, but we won't be able to do that without public support. So, we need to educate the public about the empty calories in those foods."

WEIGHT LOSS STRATEGIES OF THE FUTURE

Duncan notes several new technologies and obesity drugs currently being studied or tested. "For example, there's something called gastric pacing, which involves putting probes into the patient's stomach—it tricks the stomach into thinking it's full. The procedure has a variable success rate; it's not quite there yet, but it holds promise," he states. "Then, there are drugs that do something similar—they trick the brain into thinking the stomach is full. But these drugs are still 10 years away from being introduced into the market."

So, for now, Duncan's comprehensive, scientific approach to weight loss—surgery, combined with a good nutrition and exercise plan—seems to be the most successful and lasting plan available.

"We now know that there are scientific reasons and ways for patients to not only lose the fat, but keep it off long-term," he says. "And when you base it upon science, it makes sense. If you give patients a plan and an outline to follow, and it makes sense to them, they'll succeed."

For more information about the Weight Loss Program at Atlanta Medical Center, call 1-888-457-5204. ■