

Doubt cast on MS miracle treatment



GARY NYLANDER/The Daily Courier

Jan Mills practises her golf skills at Gallagher's Canyon on Wednesday. Mills recently travelled to a private clinic in Mexico for an experimental MS treatment. She was confined to a wheelchair or walker, but she can now walk, drive a car and golf.

Experts skeptical about controversial treatment pioneered by Italian doctor

By The Canadian Press

OTTAWA — Kelowna's Jan Mills can feel her fingertips.

Most people take that feeling for granted, but she doesn't. Multiple sclerosis stole the sensation right out of her hands 24 years ago. But since a doctor in Mexico opened her clogged neck veins in April, Mills says she's been able to do all kinds of things she couldn't do before.

She can walk. She can drive. She can even golf — although she jokes she's not going to make the pro tour any time soon.

She can also ride a bike, which she'll be doing with a team of Gallagher's Canyon residents in the Okanagan Grape Escape Tour Sept. 18-19, part of the nationwide Rona MS Bike Tours, which will raise fund for MS research.

But the thought of hitting the links must have been far from Mills' mind this winter when she was confined to a wheelchair and walker.

Mills travelled from her home in Kelowna to

the Sanoviv Medical Institute in Rosarito, Mexico, just south of San Diego, Calif., this spring for an experimental MS treatment that has given hope to scores of people who suffer from the debilitating nerve disease.

Surgeons opened her blocked neck veins with a stent. She says she felt a change on the operating table.

"I moved my arm and was able to feel the palms of my hands, which have been numb for two decades," Mills said.

"And I thought, 'Oh my God, I can feel the palms of my hands.' And then while I was doing that, I noticed the dexterity of my fingers.

"I was so excited when they were wheeling me to the recovery room, where I met my husband ... and I said, 'Honey, look! I can feel my hands, and look how fast I can move my fingers.'"

Mills believes in the treatment. But a group of leading researchers isn't so sure.

Top North American scientists say there's not enough evidence to back claims by Dr. Paolo Zamboni of Italy that blocked neck veins are linked with MS. The Canadian Institutes of Health Research held a news conference Tuesday in Ottawa to make recommendations on MS research priorities.

The head of the federal agency which funds health research says the experts weren't convinced Zamboni's procedure works and is safe, and so they say it's too early to back clinical trials.

"There was a unanimous recommendation by the members of the working group not to support such a trial at this stage," Alain Beaudet said. "Quite simply, the experts agreed that there is an overwhelming lack of scientific evidence on the safety and efficacy of the procedure."

Multiple sclerosis has long been thought to be an autoimmune disease. But Zamboni contends that iron builds up in the brain because blood is not draining properly. So he treats his patients by opening up the veins, either by inserting a small balloon — a procedure called angioplasty — or by inserting a stent.

Zamboni's research found vein blockages in all the MS patients he examined, and no blockages in healthy people he used as control subjects. But work elsewhere hasn't entirely supported his findings. It's not clear if MS causes blocked veins, if blocked veins cause MS, or if the two are entirely unrelated.

Mills also said people can email her at jan@janmills.net for more information.