Treating the ‘Whole Patient’

A growing facility offers a number of programs to support amputees both inside and outside of the clinic

Sam Santa-Rita’s first exposure to the O&P field came when he was 12 years old and traded in his paper route to help out at an O&P facility in Toledo, Ohio, owned by Gary Fessenden. Santa-Rita started by mowing the lawn and progressed to his “first real job in O&P,” running a sewing machine.

Fast forward to 2001, when, after becoming a certified prosthetist and working for both Wright & Filippis and Hanger, Santa-Rita decided to open his own practice. He began building a facility in Fort Wayne, Indiana, that was soon followed by locations in Kokomo and Bryan, Ohio. Today, SRT Prosthetics & Orthotics has seven offices in Ohio and Indiana, including the National Prosthetic Center in Indianapolis, a 14,000-square-foot facility offering patients real-world scenarios to test their prostheses, a fully equipped gym, and a room devoted to activities of daily living.

SRT has 38 employees, including 12 clinicians. The company handles all of its own fabrication in two facilities, one in Fort Wayne that serves the northern parts of Ohio and Indiana, and one in Indianapolis that supports the remainder of the state. SRT focuses on both lower- and upper-extremity prosthetics, which accounts for about 90 percent of its patients. “We do...
orthotics as well,” says Santa-Rita, “but prosthetics is my passion.” SRT offers a full range of devices, including those for elite athletes and others using highly advanced technologies.

In addition to its daily O&P services, SRT features a number of programs to benefit amputees. The Amputee Walking School is a joint project with former Paralympic gold medalists Dennis Oehler and Todd Schaffhauser, who have designed a community program bringing together amputees for strength-training exercises, socializing, and support.

“Amputees find a light, positive atmosphere at the Walking School,” explains Santa-Rita. “There are nicknames, hugs, friendly teasing. It also gives physical therapists (PTs) and occupational therapists (OTs) the chance to have a hands-on experience with amputees and for prosthetists to see how their devices are working in the real world.”

In conjunction with the Walking School, SRT offers a half-day training for PTs and OTs in working with amputees. The training is free and recently qualified as a source of continuing education credits for therapists. The company also offers formal educational programs at PT and OT facilities, including nursing homes, outpatient therapy groups, and hospitals. These, too, provide continuing education credits and are free of charge.

Santa-Rita has another passion: self-defense. He qualified as a police officer in Ohio in 2009, attending school at night, and became an instructor with the Tactical Defense Institute (TDI), which offers self-defense and firearm training.

Santa-Rita said he learned early on that amputees can have a heightened concern for their personal safety. “I started to realize that more than half of my patients, especially in Detroit, carry firearms,” he says. “I felt it was important for them to know how to prevent threatening situations, or to handle them responsibly and effectively.” Santa-Rita and TDI collaborated on a program specifically for amputees and others with physical challenges.

SRT also sponsors The Way Outfitters, an organization that offers outdoor experiences to those with disabilities, including hunting, fishing, deep sea diving, and horseback riding. The group is the subject of a nationally aired television show on the Sportsman Channel that follows participants on their adventures. SRT is sole sponsor of the show, which has featured patients in several episodes.

Santa-Rita believes the O&P industry is facing tough times ahead in the face of RAC audits. “We struggled with cash flow for a year, and it took some painful changes, but I’m happy to say we have turned the corner,” he says. “Unfortunately, some excellent clinicians are not necessarily savvy business people, and I think we’ll be seeing a lot of facilities that can’t improve their productivity having to close.”

Responding to RAC audits was a learning experience, Santa-Rita says, and SRT is winning most audits now. “We run a very transparent business,” he says.

Although Santa-Rita is waiting to see how the Affordable Care Act will affect his business, he already has identified facilities and geographical areas for future expansion. No matter how big SRT becomes, however, he stresses that his company’s mission will remain the same: to focus on the whole person, not just the part that is missing. O&P

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