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Press Release

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Two children can't wait for their "best ever" Christmas present which promises relief from a disabling stomach disorder.

It's that time of the year when Calgarians get hit with the stomach flu — that queasy feeling that falls over you with a sense of fatigue, headache, and a desire to retreat to bed, and builds to a crescendo of an overwhelming urge to vomit.

Now imagine living with these symptoms every day for years!

Two children in Calgary will become the youngest ever and the only Canadian children to receive treatment with a new, neurostimulating device, implanted in their stomachs — a treatment to help control their debilitating, chronic nausea.

Jennifer Ferris, 15 and her brother, Thomas Ferris, 13 have been struggling for nearly 7 years with constant, persistent nausea, bloating, acid reflux, and infrequent vomiting spells, all resulting from an infection from giardia or beaver fever.

Jennifer and Thomas were avid skiers and the family spent every weekend in the mountains. Everything came to a halt in February of 1998 when the children fell ill with giardia. Though the giardia was successfully treated, their symptoms persisted. Both children began missing significant amounts of school due to non-stop nausea, bloating, belching, and terrible heartburn. Not even sleep could bring relief from the nausea.

Restless dreams had the children visited by "nausea monsters" inducing them to vomit in their dreams, only to have them awaken with an overwhelming urge to vomit.

Eating just made the symptoms all the worse. The children became housebound and started slowly losing weight. Jennifer described the symptoms as "a stomach flu that never goes away."

Finding a treatment that would subdue the children's symptoms was proving to be an

exhaustive search for the family. Then the family found Dr. Thomas Abell at the University of Mississippi Medical Center in Jackson, Mississippi. He is a world-leading expert in these digestive problems and has been dubbed the nausea and vomiting specialist.

Over 20 years ago, Dr. Abell became fascinated by this group of patients (frequently young females) who experience unexplained nausea, vomiting, and abdominal pain, often occurring after a stomach infection. This group of patients was commonly labelled as neurotic, depressed, and stressed out — labels implying a psychologically driven problem of digestive upset.

What Dr. Abell discovered was an overlap of this group of patients with diabetics who also suffer from similar digestive upset. Both groups often demonstrate “delayed gastric emptying” which showed evidence of a neuromuscular motor disturbance within the stomach.

Other researchers had discovered that the stomach has a neuroelectrical system not unlike the heart; and just as a heart pacemaker device can help restore normal heart rhythms, Dr. Abell felt he could induce more normal rhythms in the stomach with a neurostimulating device.

Dr. Abell pioneered the use of this device which is proving to be a potent, anti-nauseant, anti-vomiting tool. Dr. Abell says, “Really, it made sense. Once we realized this was a neuromuscular disorder that we were dealing with, then a neurostimulating device should help.” Just as neurostimulators are used with great success to treat the tremors of Parkinson’s disease and in the treatment of severe pain with spinal cord stimulation, a similar method is applied to the stomach.

Dr. Abell has taken the system one step further. He can perform a temporary trial of gastric neurostimulation by placing an electrode on the inside surface of the stomach with the wire lead and pulse generator/battery exiting from the mouth. By adjusting the levels of electrical stimulation, a patient can try the system out for three days to see if it reduces nausea and vomiting. This temporary trial allows Dr. Abell to screen for patients who will respond to the permanent, implantable, gastric electrical stimulation system.

Jennifer and Thomas visited Dr. Abell this summer to try out the gastric stimulator. Their response was wondrous — for the first time in years they were actually free of their disabling nausea. Jenny said, “I really had forgotten what it was like to feel ‘normal’.” Thomas can’t wait for the surgery. He, too, said that for the first time in his memory “somebody finally turned off the nausea like a light switch”.

While other children will be spending Christmas opening gifts, Jenny and Thomas will be recovering in a hospital bed thankful for the best gifts of all: a chance at feeling healthy once again, and restored faith in their futures to be able to fulfill their dreams.