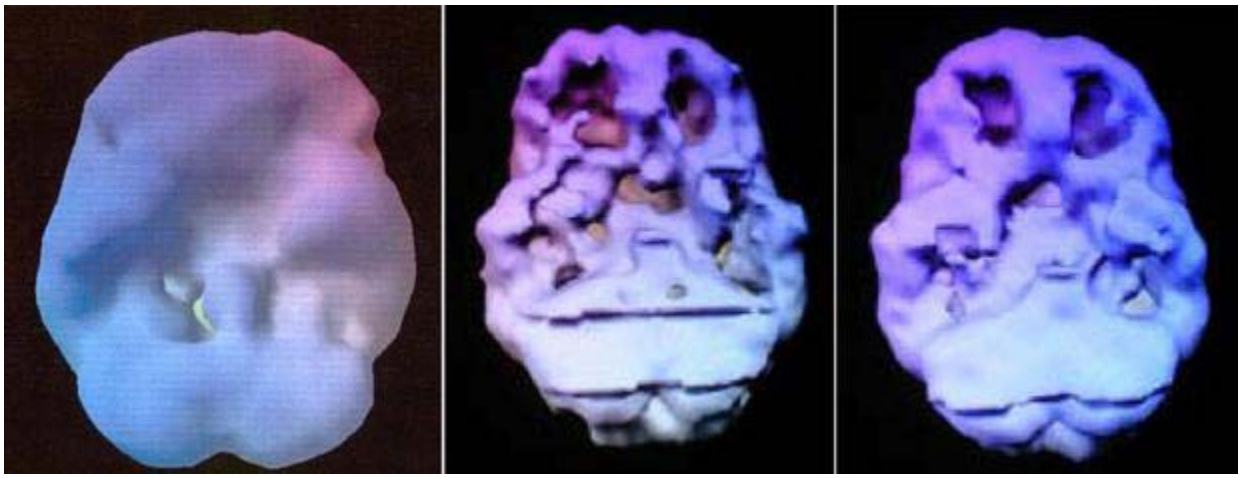
Dr. Barbara Krantz, once an addict herself, is passionate about treating others



From left: Normal brain, brain subjected to alcohol/cocaine abuse, and a brain subjected to alcohol/cocaine abuse after two months of treatment. The 'holes' indicate low blood flow in the brain and the resulting reduced brain function. Note the "holes" in the prefrontal cortex, which governs impulse control, among other functions. The lack of blood flow in that area indicates that the patient's ability to govern his impulses is impaired. The Hanley Center in West Palm Beach is one of only two addiction treatment centers in the country to use SPECT (single photo emission computer tomography) scans to see how substance abuse has affected an addict's brain.



Taylor Jones / The Post

Dr. Barbara Krantz, CEO and director of medicine at the Hanley Center in West Palm Beach, is passionate about demonstrating that addiction is a disease with a biological basis, like high blood pressure.

The addicts say it all the time.

"Doctor, you have no idea how hard this is."

Looking at this motherly woman with the empathetic blue eyes, they ask, "What could you know about addiction, anyway?"

Dr. Barbara Krantz, the CEO and director of medicine at the Hanley Center in West Palm Beach, says gently, "Let me tell you my story "

Barbara Krantz pulls up an image of a patient's brain on a computer screen. The man has been in and out of treatment for years, unable to stay off the drugs that are killing him. Krantz, a 60-year-old former family doctor and one of the country's leading researchers in addiction medicine, zeroes in on what she thinks is the cause.

"There, see that?"

The SPECT image shows a brain that looks like Swiss cheese, as if something has been nibbling at the tissue. The "holes," Krantz explains, are areas of reduced brain activity due to low blood flow. The largest "holes" are in the part that governs impulse control, called the prefrontal cortex.

To Krantz, the brain scan shows the patient can't stop using drugs because he can't control his impulsivity. In other words, it wasn't lack of willpower or some character defect that made it impossible for the man to get clean. The part of his brain that might enable him to "just say no" was damaged.

Begin to heal those "holes," which Krantz says is possible in a matter of months, and you may begin to heal the patient. Knowing what parts of the brain are affected by addiction also helps Hanley target therapeutic drugs, such as antidepressants, to enhance recovery.

"It's very, very cutting edge stuff," said Paul Kenny, a neurobiologist at Scripps Research Center in Jupiter, who is collaborating with Krantz on this research, which recently got Krantz and the Hanley center national attention in Time magazine.

In the world of addiction medicine, Krantz is the link between discoveries in the lab and their application to patients, Kenny said.

Former state senator Tom Rossin, the chairman of Hanley's board of directors, calls Krantz "one of those caring doctors we all would like to have but she's also one of the country's premier experts in the field of addiction."

She is passionate about demonstrating that addiction is a disease with a biological basis, like high blood pressure.

Thirty years ago, she learned it the hardest way possible.

It began in the late 1970s with severe headaches - stress headaches, she thinks now, but then labeled migraines. She was 29, one of the first female family doctors in Palm Beach County. She and her then-husband had a 6-month-old baby when she went to a neurologist, desperate for relief from the pounding in her head.

He gave her a shot of Demerol and her wobbly world slid miraculously back into place. The throbbing headache was replaced by an seductive euphoria that let her float through hours of work and still be up scrubbing floors at 5 a.m. Within months, she was injecting Demerol daily, confident she wasn't addicted.

"My perception of an addict was a skid row bum, shooting heroin. I knew I wasn't an addict because I was a mom and it was prescription medicine," she said .

The drug gripped tightly, quickly. She says she was addicted within six to eight months. When making house calls to terminally ill patients who needed pain control, she'd give the patient a shot from a vial of Demerol and save the rest for herself.

In 1981, her mother pushed her into treatment. Eventually, she spent six months at a program for addicted physicians. She was perplexed, even angry, that no one there, at a facility that specialized in treating doctors, "could answer my questions about what was happening in my brain."

She resumed her practice, but still felt fragile and off-kilter.

"The first two years (in recovery,) you just don't feel right. My brain wasn't back," Krantz said. "I still didn't have a clue about neurochemistry."

All the while, she was dealing with the public perception, even among fellow physicians, that her addiction stemmed from weakness and moral deficiency.

"The guilt and shame that I experienced for the first two years of my recovery were close to lethal," Krantz said.

Yet Krantz, who made house calls and conducted free physicals for children about to be adopted, knew she lacked neither morality nor character. Surely, something else was at work in her and other addicts' brains.

She became a specialist in addiction medicine to search for answers and slowly wrestled her life back to normalcy.

Then in 1985, she was pregnant with her middle child, Sean, when a Miami hospital called, thinking she was her mother's doctor instead of her daughter.

"They wanted permission to take her off life support," Krantz said, which was how she learned her mother had been murdered.

A man seeking revenge on an employer crushed her 55-year-old mother's skull with a lead pipe when she happened into the shop.

Seeing her mother's body sent Krantz into early labor. Sean was born three months premature but Krantz got through it all without relapsing. Three years later, she adopted a baby girl, Kate.

She loved her work at area addiction treatment centers, her patients adored her and her three children were thriving, even though she and her first husband divorced.

Then, one night in 1997, the world she had painstakingly reconstructed collapsed when highway patrolmen came to her door with unbearable news.

Her oldest son, 18-year-old Rob Krantz-Cuskaden, was one of two teens killed in a Interstate 95 rollover crash, while returning from a college-scouting trip to Orlando.

"I prayed that if there was a God, for him to kill me now. I'd lost my father, lost my mom, my oldest son, I couldn't go on," Krantz remembers. "Talk about a trigger for relapse!"

She pauses, to gauge how her description of what happened next will be received.

"All of a sudden it was as if someone took a blanket and put it around my shoulders. I felt a calmness. And I heard, not audibly but as a clear thought, 'Seek ye first the Kingdom of God'."

After looking up the quote and finding it in the Book of Matthew, she felt a shift, as if a small sliver of something like peace pierced her desperation.

Krantz, a lapsed Catholic, started attending a nearby non-denominational church.

"When you lose someone you love, you start asking all the hard questions: 'Why am I here?', 'What's life for?' I thought, 'Well, obviously I've been given some skills to put to use'."

She used them.

Two years after Rob's death, she founded His Great Commission, a non-profit medical outreach program, in his memory. For 10 years before she had to close the program last year, Krantz and other volunteers ventured into the county's roughest neighborhoods, offering free basic medical care. Addicts all over the county grew to trust the tall blond woman who didn't preach and refused to judge.

"Not everybody can do what Barbara did," said Sandra White, of United Deliverance Church in West Palm Beach, who volunteered alongside Krantz. "It was admirable and risky."

Today, Krantz is finally a woman in full. Six years ago, she married James Roddy, a retired career Air Force man. When she's not working, they live an outdoor life, fishing and diving near their home in Palm City. She's built a national reputation as a lecturer and was quoted in September in a Time magazine article on prescription drug addiction, which she calls "pharmageddon."

These days, three immutable certainties guide her life: addiction is a medical disease, God exists and as she knows intimately, the human spirit can soar above heartbreak with purpose and hope.

A carved wooden sign on her desk reads: "Care Deeply."

Tellingly, it faces visitors. Krantz doesn't need reminding.