

New Thinking, New Options for Spine Surgery

Written by Ingrid Pierce

BUSY RAISING TWO YOUNG BOYS, COACHING BASEBALL, AND MANAGING HER HOUSEHOLD, 49-YEAR-OLD ROBIN JENNINGS HAD NO TIME FOR INTERRUPTIONS.

Yet two years ago, shooting pain in her shoulders and neck disrupted Robin's active and productive life.

Robin recalled the skiing accident more than 10 years ago that had made it impossible for her to lift her arm above her head. Surgery had fixed the problem for a while. Now the pain was back with a vengeance.

The suffering in Robin's shoulders intensified. "It was torment. It was like somebody was taking a knife and stabbing me in the shoulder," she said. Her fingers felt numb, too.

She would go to bed in pain and wake up in pain. Tylenol did not help. There was no relief.

Robin endured. "As a Mom, you just keep going," she said. Eventually, however, her husband pleaded with her to do something.

A friend who had undergone successful spine surgery advised Robin to make an appointment with Dr. Jesse Stem, a surgeon at the Orthopaedic Center of Central Virginia in Lynchburg.

Robin met with Dr. Stem, known by his patients as "Dr. Jesse." He explained that pinched nerves in her neck were causing the pain in her shoulders. The cushion between some of her vertebrae had dissolved.

Dr. Stem assured Robin that he could help, but did not push surgery. Robin tried prescribed pain medication, which gave her enough relief to sleep six hours a night, but she still suffered significant pain. At that point, Dr. Stem advised her to consider surgery.

What is cervical fusion?

Dr. Stem recommended cervical fusion, the procedure that "makes the biggest difference in my patients' lives." The surgery takes pressure off nerves in the neck, relieving shoulder and arm pain. Mere hours after cervical fusion, patients report that their pain is gone. Dr. Stem estimates that 95 out of 100 people who undergo the surgery say they would do it again.

Cervical fusion, a minimally invasive procedure, takes only one hour and can be done on an outpatient basis, Dr. Stem explained to Robin. After making an incision an inch and a half long, the surgeon goes in through the front of the neck. Using an operating microscope, the problematic disc is removed, immediately relieving pressure on the nerve. The disc is then replaced with a bone graft donated from a cadaver. Tiny titanium plates and screws designed by Medtronic, a medical technology company, are

inserted to hold the vertebrae in place while the bone graft heals.

Fifteen years ago, no surgeon was doing this kind of operation on an out-patient basis. The bone graft would be extracted from the patient's hip, resulting in a painful recovery. Patients had to wear a hard collar for up to six months, which made eating and showering tricky. Yet today, cervical fusion patients leave the operating room with nothing on their necks but a piece of gauze.

After hearing this description, and praying with her husband, Robin was convinced. On September 16, 2009, she underwent cervical fusion, a procedure she describes as "very easy." Robin spent the night in the hospital because of her diabetes and high blood pressure. She also experienced scratchy vocal chords and tenderness in her throat because of the incision, necessitating a liquid diet for a couple of weeks. But that was it. Her pain was minimal.

"I have my life back again."

Just six weeks later, Robin feels a dramatic difference with all lingering pain expected to vanish soon. She is back to her normal activities, avoiding only heavy lifting. Would she have the surgery done again if necessary? "With Dr. Jesse, I absolutely would." Robin praises the kindness and professionalism of Dr. Jesse.

Robin's only regret? She should have had the surgery before she and her husband celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary in Hawaii. "I think I would have enjoyed the experience more if I hadn't had the pain."

Future standard of care

Dr. Stem looks beyond cervical fusion to a new technology that promises even greater results for patients like Robin. Disc replacement surgery, developed by Medtronic, is what he calls "the wave of the future." Whereas cervical fusion locks vertebrae together, thus restricting motion in the neck, disc replacement preserves range of motion. This new surgery involves inserting a stainless steel disc. Dr. Stem believes the procedure is superior, and speaks about it with enthusiasm.

Procuring approval for insurance coverage of disc replacement has been slow. Insurance companies sometimes lag in accepting this new technology, even though the FDA approved it two years ago and the new procedure costs less than traditional fusion, Dr. Stem said.

Nevertheless, Dr. Stem has great hopes for the general acceptance and widespread use of this new surgery. In the future, disc replacement surgery is going to be the "standard of care," he said.