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## Local residents find second wind after overcoming back injuries with surgery and physical therapy

BY GARY WALKER

According to a University of Washington School of Medicine study, back pain afflicts over 80 percent of the population at some point in their lives. It can hamper everyday functions and at times infringe on taking part in activities with friends and family.

Two local residents have seen the quality of their lives improve after they chose to face their conditions head-on, and they are happy that they made the choice to take their health into their own hands.

Barry Thompson, a 44-year-old Playa del Rey attorney, was on vacation in Costa Rica two years ago with his wife and two young sons when he began to lose mobility in his legs. Forced to cut his vacation short, he saw a physical therapist, who in turn steered him to Dr. Robert Watkins Jr., an orthopedic surgeon who is co-director of The Marina Spine Center in Marina del Rey with his father, Robert Sr.

The younger Watkins, who specializes in disc replacement and spinal deformities, performed a microdiscotomy on Thompson, which involves repairing herniated discs in the spine. Soon after the operation, Thompson began to experience relief in his legs.

"I heard that [the doctors] were renowned spine specialists, so I met with both of them," Thompson said during a telephone interview.

In a microdiscotomy, a small portion of the bone over the nerve root and/or disc material from under the nerve root is removed to relieve neural impingement and provide more room for the nerve to heal.

Thompson can now enjoy life as he had prior to the operation.

"I am now pain-free," the attorney said happily. "It's a huge relief."

The advent of three-way guided imaging has played a large role in making operations safer and improving patient care, according to the doctors Watkins.

"Image guidance makes the surgeries safer and better for both the patient and the surgeon," said Robert Watkins Jr.

The Marina Spine Center was the first medical facility on the West Coast to employ a new, state of the art, three-dimensional image-guided system last December, he says.

Previous navigation systems provided only two-dimensional images or relied on a preoperative CT (Computed tomography) scan. Now, with a three-dimensional image on the operating room table, the spinal surgeon is in full control during the operation while the computer offers visual support and guidance, he says.

The younger Watkins used the technology while performing a posterior lumbar spinal fusion.

"People walk the day after the surgery, and full recovery is three to six months, because that's how long it takes for bone to heal," he explained.

During a consultation with a patient regarding the benefits of three-dimensional image-guided surgery, increased safety and chances of having a successful procedure are the benefits to the patients that are highlighted, said Watkins Sr.

"The use of image guidance makes the surgery safer, decreases the risks of complication and increases the chance of a successful fusion," he said.

Not everyone who experiences back pain requires invasive surgery.

David Van Court has recently seen his quality of life improve greatly, as well, but not before a painful surgery led to back trouble.

"In 1992, after an accident at home, I had a 'C56' level emergency fusion," Van Court recalled. "Back surgery techniques were not as advanced as they are now."

A C56 injury occurs in the spine or neck area, and spinal surgeons say that if this type of injury is not repaired immediately, potential

paralysis could occur.

Van Court, 46, who lives in Santa Monica, subsequently developed degenerative cervical disc disease and sought medical advice on what he should do for his back.

"I went to another surgeon, who encouraged me to go through more surgeries that I thought were unnecessary," Van Court said.

He turned to Watkins Jr. at the beginning of the year after learning that there was a surgeon within a few miles of his home who had a solid reputation for performing spinal surgeries.

"The doctor told me that surgery would not be a sure-fire cure, and he wanted to see if physical therapy would help at first," said Van Court.

Given his past experience with back surgery, that was welcome news for Van Court.

"I really appreciated him telling me that," the Santa Monica resident said.

The Marina surgeons feels that when and if a patient does require surgery, the new image- guided systems have made the biggest difference in a successful operation and subsequent recovery.

"The number one thing that improved our diagnostic abilities were the imaging studies," said Watkins Sr. "In the early '60s and '70s, we didn't have the MRIs (magnetic resonance imaging) and all of the different ways of seeing the inside anatomy and relating that to the physical examination of the patient. So, the imaging studies have been an overwhelmingly important thing in our business."

"I've been fortunate to come into the field at a time when there's been an explosion of new techniques and new devices that are being used, like artificial discs and image-guided surgery," the younger Watkins added. "I'm really impressed by a lot of the new technology and how they can really help people have safer surgeries."

Van Court is fortunate that he has the option of not having another procedure on his back for the time being.

"Dr. Watkins said that I could have the surgery if I wanted to in the future," he said.

During physical therapy, Van Court learned that there were certain weaknesses in his back muscles along with his posture that were contributing factors to his daily discomfort.

"Once I started to do the physical therapy exercises, I got some immediate results," he said. "I even have some lateral movement in my head, which I didn't have before."

Thanks to sound medical advice, Van Court now feels that he is in control of his life instead of the other way around.

"The good thing is that now I know that I have a choice in how I can affect my own health," he said.