

Righting the spine

Sufferers seek out Amarillo surgeon

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Terry Janney lives in Spokane, Wash., almost 1,500 miles from Amarillo. But her doctor and the place of her life-changing surgery are here.

She had never been to the Lone Star state - let alone the Panhandle.

"I really didn't know anything about it," Janney said of Amarillo. "I just knew it was a small town. I really didn't know anything."

Janney suffered from flat-back syndrome, a condition that resulted from an earlier surgery to fix her scoliosis.

Michael LaGrone, a Canyon native and orthopedic surgeon with a private practice in Amarillo, is one of the few doctors in the country who specializes in the complex surgery to fix Janney's condition.

Janney knew something had to be done when her foot kept falling asleep when she walked long distances.

The once avid golfer couldn't play anymore. She had to sit down just to cook.

She made a visit to Amarillo and LaGrone for a preliminary visit in February 2006.

Cases of flat-back syndrome usually result from scoliosis-corrective surgery.

In early days of scoliosis treatment, a stainless steel rod, called a Harrington rod, was hooked on the spine to straighten out scoliosis' characteristic side-to-side curvature.

The Harrington rod straightens the backward curvature at the base of the spine and forces the person to hunch forward.

Patients who had the surgery also complained of many other physical side effects of the condition.

Janney, like many other of LaGrone's patients, discovered him through others with similar problems in online chat rooms and message boards.

LaGrone's name kept popping up in discussions.

"Everybody talks about who to go to and who to stay away from," Janney said.

There are only a handful of doctors in the country who treat flat-back syndrome.

"There's only a small number of doctors doing adult spinal deformities," said David Bradford, a pioneer in the surgery to correct flat-back syndrome who trained LaGrone when the two worked at the University of Minnesota Hospitals in the 1980s.

Of those few, LaGrone is considered one of the better surgeons to treat the condition.

"I would say he's probably one of the best known people who do that type of work," said Howard King, a clinical associate professor at the University of Washington and orthopedic surgeon at Intermountain Orthopedics in Boise, Idaho.

Patients from Spokane, Wash., Pittsburgh, Penn., Tennessee, Oregon and Puerto Rico have flown to Amarillo to see LaGrone.

Grew up in Canyon

LaGrone grew up in Canyon and got his bachelor's degree in biology from West Texas A&M University. He attended medical school at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas.

The 55-year-old moved back to Amarillo in 1994 after extensive training and experience in orthopedic surgery.

LaGrone said he was lucky to win a fellowship at the University of Minnesota with some of the pioneers in flat-back treatments after two years of being an orthopedic surgeon in the Army.

It was in Minneapolis he worked with Bradford, who was one of the first to recognize flat-back as a problem and developed the treatment to fix it.

"He was an excellent surgeon, took good care of his patients and extremely dedicated," Bradford said.

Bradford is now a professor and chair emeritus of the department of orthopedic surgery at the University of California at San Francisco School of Medicine.

LaGrone came back to Amarillo because of family reasons and the high quality of life. He and his wife, Vicki, were busy raising their son and daughter. Plus, both their parents live in the Panhandle.

"I'd really thought I'd move back to Amarillo and do general orthopedics," LaGrone said.

However, patients started showing up with problems. They contacted him looking for treatments for their flat-back syndromes.

Flew from Puerto Rico

Damaris Rivera started having back problems more than 26 years after her first scoliosis surgery while in her hometown of Boymon, Puerto Rico.

She saw a doctor in her home country.

"When he told me what his treatment was, I didn't like it," the 53-year-old Rivera said.

She went home on got on the Internet to find help. Rivera found a woman who also had flat-back. She recommended LaGrone.

Rivera also found his name mentioned on the National Scoliosis Foundation's Web site in connection with flat-back syndrome.

She flew to Amarillo to meet with LaGrone in October 2005.

Rivera said she felt at piece with LaGrone. He was down to Earth, friendly and explained everything in a way she could understand.

"He combines all his knowledge with a beautiful human being," Rivera said.

Rivera used a wheelchair to move when she had her surgery with LaGrone on Dec. 19, 2005.

Surgery risky

Surgery to fix flat-back syndrome is complex with high complication rates.

An incision is made in the abdomen to get to the front of the spine. The patient is flipped over and another incision is made stretching along the spine.

LaGrone said he then "takes the spine apart and puts it back together."

Oftentimes, LaGrone must remove old rods previously there, take a wedge of bone out of vertebra to correct the spine and insert new bone.

"It's not for the faint of heart," LaGrone said.

The surgery lasts anywhere from eight to 12 hours. Patients spend up to three days in the intensive care unit afterward and about a week in rehab.

LaGrone estimates he's done between 50 and 60 such flat-back surgeries.

"I would say it's probably one of the most technical things we do," said King of Boise, Idaho. "A lot of physicians won't even do the surgery. They'll refer to other doctors."

LaGrone said successful surgery takes good training, experience and innate skill to treat the spinal deformity.

"You just develop a good sense of how to treat the surgery," LaGrone said.

Complications from surgery are fairly high. Most patients have at least one minor complication.

About 15 percent to 20 percent of patients have to have some type of follow-up surgery. LaGrone has never had a patient die or become paralyzed.

Standing taller

Diane Miller of Pittsburgh walked like E.T. before LaGrone performed surgery to fix her flat-back. She was tilted over at about 45 degrees.

Her knees gave her a lot of pain, compensating for her weak back. She and her husband, Al, bought a bigger car because Diane had to bend down to climb into her old one.

She stands 5 feet 5 inches tall after her 2001 surgery. She was 5-foot-3 before. Correcting her flat-back caused her to gain two-and-one-half inches.

Puerto Rico's Damaris Rivera doesn't need a wheelchair to get around any more. She even runs a little.

"I thank the Lord and Dr. LaGrone for my walking," Rivera said.

Spokane, Wash.'s Terry Janney's pain is gone six months after her surgery. She does more bending and twisting of her back than she should.

Janney, who was an avid golfer before her back worsened, received a special invitation from her doctor, who also loves the game.

LaGrone invited her back to Amarillo to teach her how to swing a golf club with her back condition when he gives her the OK to play again.

Scoliosis

Begins to show around age 10 to 15.

It affects 2 percent to 3 percent of the population, an estimated 6 million people in the U.S.

Eighty-five percent of the cases are classified as idiopathic. Therefore treatments are often ineffective.

SOURCE: National Scoliosis Foundation

