

Life Interrupted: Back Pain Stops Globe Trotter in her Tracks

But Minimally Invasive Spine Surgery Sends Her Packing Again

What started out as an “annoyance” two years ago turned into “excruciating pain” in her lower back that could no longer be relieved with massages, over-the-counter and prescription pain pills, cortisone injections, physical therapy or visits to the chiropractor. Karen, 54, a retired marketing executive who splits her time between Palm Springs, California and the resort town of Sandpoint, Idaho, was at a crossroads.

“I had to try something else. On a scale of 1 to 10, the pain level was about a 12,” said Karen. “It hurt to breathe. This was no way to live. I couldn't get off the couch. It was taking away my whole way of life.”



That way of life included Karen and her husband spending weeks at a time every year traveling the world and enjoying what Karen refers to as a “perpetual summer, going where the warm weather take us.” And, when she wasn't on the road or in the air, Karen spent her days taking 20- to 30-mile bike rides, exercising, hiking, horseback riding and generally enjoying life with her family and friends.

But in November 2011, everything came to a virtual stop because of severe back pain. “We cancelled everything. I missed graduations, a wedding and visits to my mom who lives in Northern California. I just couldn't sit in a car or a plane for any length of time. I couldn't do anything. The pain was just too severe.”

Karen was suffering from spondylolisthesis, a form of degenerative disc disease where one or more spinal discs slip out of place and press against the nerves or spinal cord causing severe pain. Spinal discs hold the bones of the spine together, give it its flexibility and act as shock absorbers for the spine. No single event seemed to have caused Karen's spine problems. It was something that happened over time.

“As we age, our spinal discs break down,” said Jeffrey Larson, MD, Karen's spine surgeon and founder of Coeur d'Alene Spine and Brain in Northern Idaho. “Most people do not end up needing surgery, but for those with severe pain like Karen, it is often the only effective option.”

Dr. Larson explained that spine surgery techniques and technologies have improved over the last several years, enabling more patients to benefit from minimally invasive procedures that typically result in effective pain relief, quicker recovery and less hospitalization than traditional methods. Karen would have a choice between traditional surgery in California, where she lives in the winter or minimally invasive surgery in Idaho, where she lives in the summer -- a choice that became more and more urgent with each passing day.

“At first, I was apprehensive about having back surgery of any kind. But the more I learned about the less invasive technique and the more familiar I became with Dr. Larson, the easier the choice became. He offered a much better way to approach the problem,” Karen said.



Dr. Larson explained that he would perform a minimally invasive lumbar spinal fusion surgery on Karen. He would use the lateral approach, meaning he would access the spine through the side rather than the back to avoid disruption or trauma to major muscles or organs. In the procedure, two small incisions are made through which specialized instruments are inserted so the surgeon can remove damaged discs and replace them with implants that hold the spine together while fusion occurs and restore proper disc height.

Karen had minimally invasive surgery in April 2012 and says as soon as she awoke from surgery she knew something was different. “For the first time in a long time, I didn't feel pain. I was euphoric.” She was walking around the day after surgery and was home two days later, even climbing the stairs in her three-story home. Within a month she was back to her daily biking and made three road trips including a four-day drive between Palm Springs and Sandpoint. She's back traveling again too, and will spend the better part of September in Amsterdam, Paris and the South of France.

“To go from zero quality of life to this in a few short months is amazing. I can do everything I did before the pain. I'm so happy with my surgery results,” said Karen. “My husband and I are ready to see the world again.”

According to the American Association of Neurological Surgeons, about 200,000 lumbar spinal fusion procedures are performed each year in the United States.¹ According to Dr. Larson, while traditional spinal fusion still accounts for most of the surgeries, minimally invasive procedures are becoming more popular because they are “gentler” on the patient. “We are performing tried and true techniques, but through more friendly incisions that lead to quicker recovery,” said Dr. Larson. “The promise of a quicker recovery may help people who need surgery from unnecessarily delaying treatment.”

In fact, Karen's only regret about the surgery is that she didn't have it sooner. “I tell everybody about my experience and that if they need surgery, they shouldn't put it off. The pain stopped me from doing the things I love. The surgery gave it all back to me.”



DePuy Synthes Spine Products Used in Karen's Procedure

There are a growing number of minimally invasive spine (MIS) procedures due in part to the development of innovative medical devices and instrumentation. MIS procedures were developed to treat spinal disorders with minimal disruption to surrounding muscles, tissue and organs. According to the American Association of Neurological Surgeons, MIS procedures can result in quicker recovery, decreased operative blood loss, and “speed patient return to normal function.” Many MIS procedures can be performed on an outpatient basis. In some cases, the surgeon may require a hospital stay, typically less than 24 hours to two days, depending on the procedure.²

The COUGAR[®] LS Lateral Cage System is designed specifically for the lateral approach to minimally invasive spinal fusion.



It is used to replace diseased or damaged vertebrae in the lumbar spine. Once implanted the device helps relieve pressure on the spinal cord and nerves, restore the height of collapsed vertebral body and provide strong support for the spinal column while fusion occurs.

VIPER[®] 2 Minimally Invasive Pedicle Screw System is a minimally invasive spine system offering comprehensive instrumentation and implant options that can be used on a wide range of spinal pathologies including deformity, trauma, tumor and degenerative disc disease. The rod and screw system is designed to provide immobilization and stabilization of vertebra during spinal fusion.



¹ American Association of Neurological Surgeons (AANS). Health information you should know. Accessed August 2012 from <http://www.aans.org/Media/~media/Files/Media/Camera%20Ready%20Articles/disc.ashx>

² American Association of Neurological Surgeons (AANS). Minimally invasive spine surgery (MIS). Accessed August 2012 from <http://www.aans.org/Patient%20Information/Conditions%20and%20Treatments/Minimally%20Invasive%20Spine%20Surgery%20MIS.aspx>