

Saving the body's workhorse

Artificial disc replacement offers new life for back pain sufferers

By Sandi Austin
MetroNorth Newspapers

For Dr. Jennifer Emmett, a surgeon at Denver Health Medical Center, constant back pain was not an option. While going through years of medical school and surgical training, her back pain continued to worsen and affect her way of life.

In the beginning, she thought back pain was an affliction a lot of medical students suffered from. By the fourth year of her surgical training, the pain became excruciating. The simple things that other people take for granted – getting out of bed or bending over to put on her shoes – were increasingly difficult for Emmett.

Her agony was compounded by the fact that she had to stand for hours at a time during surgery.

"I would stand at the table with a life in my hands," she said. "All the while, it felt like someone was under the table, ripping off my toenails one by one. I just couldn't continue like that."

On Sept. 20, 2006, Emmett's life changed forever. She underwent artificial disc replacement performed by Dr. Michael Janssen, orthopedic spine surgeon and member of Thornton's Center for Spinal Disorders. Within hours after surgery, she was up and walking. Two days later she was driving. She was back to work within two weeks.

"That's the benefit of this procedure," Emmett said. "The recovery is fast and that was essential to me and my career as a surgeon."

This revolutionary treatment put the Center for Spinal Disorders and North Suburban Medical Center at the forefront as the first medical facilities in the state of Colorado to perform the procedure.

During the past five years, Janssen was the lead investigator for the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which only recently approved the artificial disc (ProDisc) and paved the way for widespread education and access by surgeons in this technology.

"The FDA approval means the company that manufactures it can begin to market and sell the device to insurance companies to help patients," Janssen explained. "The FDA has granted certain surgeons permission to do this procedure for the last five years."



Dr. Jennifer Emmett, a surgeon at Denver Health Medical Center, praises the artificial disc replacement procedure that changed her life. The short recovery period enabled her to continue her medical career with minimal interruption.



Dr. Michael Janssen, orthopedic surgeon and a member of the Center for Spinal Disorders, was a lead investigator for the FDA in its research of the artificial disc.

In the past, the most common procedure to treat disc degeneration was a spinal fusion. The diseased disc is taken out and replaced with bone. This bone grows to bone and permanently stabilizes that portion of the spine. The downside to that, according to Janssen, is the long recovery period and loss of motion for the patient.

Now, the artificial disc replacement is another option for patients who want to retain their mobility because of their lifestyle or work activities.

Janssen explained that the choice is up to the patient. After a consultation with a surgeon who has experience in both technologies, the patient is better able to make the determination.

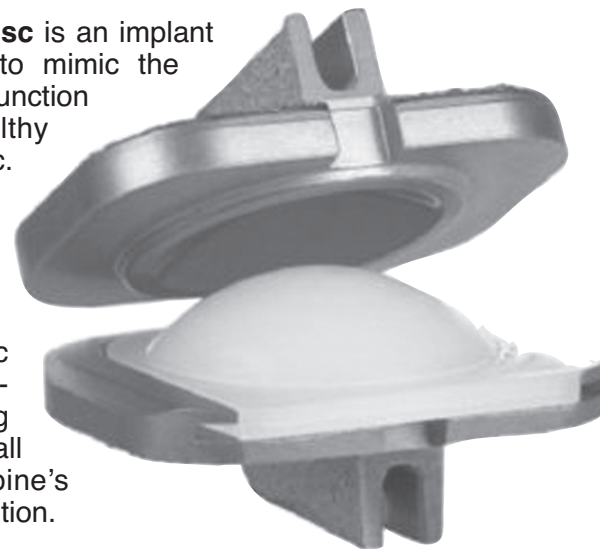
"We have patients come to the Center for Spinal Disorders from all over the world," Janssen said. "They hear about us from their primary caregivers, other patients, the Internet or just word of mouth."

Emmett sings the praises of the revolutionary surgery that changed her life.

"In a few years, it will be the standard in care," she said. "It's relatively new now, which is why I'm happy to tell people all about my experience. I'm so thankful for Dr. Janssen and this new technology. They gave me my life back!"

The Center for Spinal Disorders is located at 9005 Grant St., Suite 200, Thornton, CO 80229. You can learn more about the Center and spinal disc replacement at www.centerforspinaldisorders.com

The **ProDisc** is an implant designed to mimic the form and function of a healthy spinal disc. Its goal is to alleviate pain caused by a damaged disc while preserving some or all of the spine's natural motion.



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9005 Grant Street, Suite 200
Denver, Colorado 80229 USA
Tel 001.303.302.6000 (ASA1)
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www.amspine.com/patientcare
www.centerforspinaldisorders.com/patientcare

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Michael E. Janssen, D.O. Douglas W. Beard, M.D.
Hugh D. McPherson, M.D. Monroe I. Levine, M.D.
Andrew J. Smolenski, M.D.