

Landmark surgery ... with a twist

NEW SPINAL surgery is performed first time anywhere by Bristol doctor on his mother

BY WHITNEY MILLER
BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

BRISTOL, Tenn. — A local surgeon recently performed a new spinal implant procedure for the first time anywhere in the world.

And the patient was his mother.

Dr. Morgan Lorio performed the operation in early April at Bristol Regional Medical Center to relieve his mother's severe pain.

Barbara Lorio, 69, has spinal stenosis — a lower back disorder where joints and discs deteriorate and increase pressure on the spinal nerves. She suffered sleepless nights and fainting spells from the excruciating back and leg pain.

Dr. Lorio deemed the newly available Stabilimax NZ the best remedy for his mother's ailing spine. In a three-hour surgery, he inserted the device across two levels of spinal vertebrae. Before the operation, the spinal shock absorber had only been implanted across one vertebrae.

Dr. Lorio said he rejected the idea of performing a common spinal fusion when a better alternative was available.

He also dismissed the idea of artificial discs because "they don't adapt to the back changes. They often stiffen over time," Dr. Lorio said.

"Subsequent surgeries are often needed with artificial discs, but the Stabilimax NZ is constantly adapting to the back, making the need for later surgeries less likely," he said.

The Stabilimax NZ is a system of dual springs and ball-and-socket joints designed to decompress and stabilize the spine without decreasing mobility. Based on the spinal biomechanical research of Yale orthopedic professor Dr. Manohar Panjabi, the Stabilimax NZ was cleared for investigational use in January.

Dr. Lorio, a board-certified orthopedic surgeon at Neuro-Spine Solutions in Bristol Tennessee, said he is one of only 20 American surgeons — and



Dr. Morgan Lorio shows the new AST Stabilimax system he uses to attach to the damaged spine of patients. It gives them flexibility after surgery.

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Lorio operates on a patient's spine at Bristol Regional Medical Center. He has performed this special operation on several patients, including his mother.

the only one in this area — authorized to implant the device.

Surgeons are generally discouraged from operating on family members, but necessity

has forced Dr. Lorio to operate on close relatives before.

A Louisiana native, Dr. Lorio reconstructed his daughter's split thumbs while practicing

in his home state because no other local surgeon could perform the operation.

Barbara Lorio, a retired nurse who recently moved to Bristol

from Louisiana to be closer to her son, said she had no reservations.

"I dedicated his hands to God before he was born, and I've seen what those hands can do," she said. "I trust him."

During the operation, Dr. Lorio said he blocked out his emotions and treated the patient "like a spine rather than a mother."

"After I finished and dressed her incision, I kissed her on the cheek," he said. "Then she was my mother again."

He could empathize with his patient.

In 1982, Dr. Lorio underwent two back surgeries after injuring his spine in a 35-foot fall from a scaffold. He was a pre-med student at the time. The aspiring hand surgeon said the experience encouraged him to pursue spinal surgery as well.

The success of his mother's operation has increased his enthusiasm about the Stabilimax NZ, which he said could relieve the pain and immobility of countless aging Americans.

The word is spreading. Dr. Lorio's groundbreaking surgery on his mother was videotaped and presented at the seventh annual meeting of the Spine Arthroplasty Society, held May 1-4 in Berlin, Germany.

Barbara Lorio has recovered considerably faster than she would have after a spinal fusion.

Gardening is a hobby her back pain once prevented, but only two months after surgery, she is digging into the red earth of her garden with great zest.

"I was helping Mom in the yard the other day, and she told me to let her shovel because she was afraid I'd hurt my back. My back!" Dr. Lorio said with a laugh.

Before the surgery, Barbara Lorio could not move her legs forward more than an inch or two.

"I don't have pain!" she said of the operation's results. "It feels wonderful. If [the surgery] meant getting just two weeks without pain, it would all be worth it."

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Barbara Lorio works in her Bristol Tennessee yard two months after having spinal surgery, which was performed by her son, Dr. Morgan Lorio.