

Back on her feet

Newer minimally invasive surgery eliminates back pain fast

Again

By Sherri Kightlinger

Catherine Ellsworth's specialty is overcoming physical disabilities. In 1967, Ellsworth, then a 27-year-old registered nurse, suffered a hemorrhage in her brain that caused a stroke and paralysis on her entire right side. It also claimed

her speech. She battled back and faithfully attended rehabilitation to help restore her right side, and speech therapy to regain her speech. It took years to see results, but she was steadfast. Her tenacity paid off.

"My right side still isn't totally working, but I can walk and have some muscle movement back in my arms and legs," Ellsworth says.

In February 2006 her life changed again when she fell out of bed. "It's not like you make it through life without any accidents, but this fall really shook me up," remembers Ellsworth, now 66. "At the time, I was more concerned about my eye bruising, but when I experienced increasing pain on my left side, which is my strong side, I became very concerned."

After an especially painful episode a few weeks later, she headed to the emergency department. Because the pain ran down the back of one thigh and into her leg, Ellsworth

thought she had sciatica, but the CT scan came back negative. She took prescription strength Motrin for a few weeks. It provided some relief, but she still had persistent pain and weakness in her left leg.

"The pain was unbearable. I needed help and didn't want to rely on narcotics," Ellsworth says.

A Miraculous Ending

Referred by her internist to Hillcrest Hospital board-certified neurosurgeon David R. Blatt, M.D., Ellsworth found the miracle she was looking for. After reviewing diagnostic tests, including an MRI, Dr. Blatt says that she had a slippage between two of the bones in her lower back (spondylolisthesis), and was experiencing severe pressure on the nerves in her spine (spinal stenosis).

"Given her new disability and the MRI findings, she required surgery to take pressure off the nerves and to fixate, or fuse, the two bones together," he says. "Given her pre-existing disability, I was very concerned that she would not be able to recover from a typical spinal fusion procedure.

"To have a successful outcome I needed to perform her surgery with less damage to the tissues and surrounding structures, and provide quicker recovery with



Catherine Ellsworth is pain-free, and that's all she can ask for, she says.



Catherine Ellsworth

minimized pain,” Dr. Blatt adds. “I felt she was an excellent candidate for a minimal access or minimally invasive spinal fusion.”

Extensively trained in spinal and cranial surgery, Dr. Blatt’s expertise includes lumbar decompression and fusion procedures—among them, the new minimal access and image-guided techniques. He performed Ellsworth’s surgery at Hillcrest Hospital in just under three hours.

After surgery, Ellsworth spent 10 days in the rehabilitation unit at Euclid Hospital. Twice a day she worked on aggressive physical and

occupational therapy. After her rehabilitation stay, she utilized Cleveland Clinic’s home health team.

“I am an old hat at being handicapped, but this team gave me new tips and insights on how to do things at home,” she says. “They were wonderful people, and I’d just like to praise the quality of their work.”

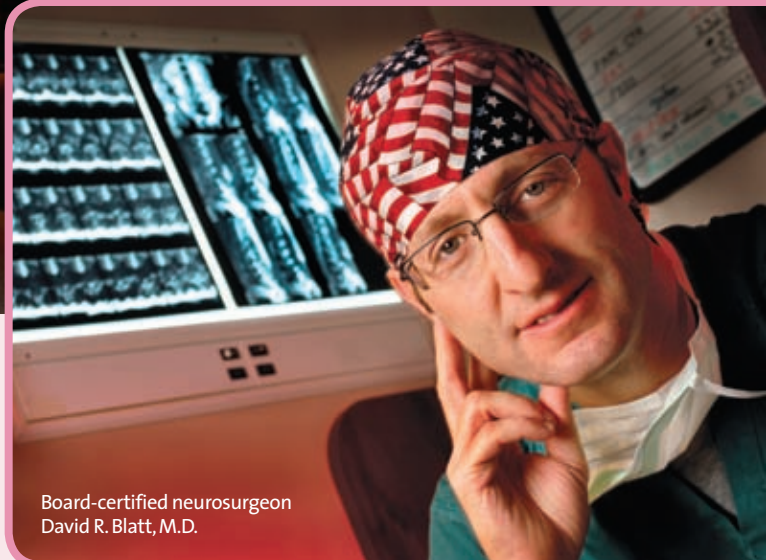
The Team Approach

Dr. Blatt notes that patients typically go home on the first or second

postoperative day and do not need to go to a rehabilitation facility, but given Ellsworth’s prior difficulties, he wanted to be sure she was fully independent before going home. “The team helped her to accomplish that,” Dr. Blatt says.

Ellsworth was up and walking without pain just two to three weeks after surgery. “Typically by the first post-op office visit, patients after minimally invasive fusions are doing just about everything they want, though they still do have to limit more strenuous activities until they are fully healed in six to 12 weeks,” Dr. Blatt says. “Mrs. Ellsworth’s prognosis is excellent. She was very motivated to get better.”

Ellsworth couldn’t be happier. “While I can’t say it was a joy to have surgery, I have nothing but good things to say about Dr. Blatt and my two-day stay at Hillcrest,”



Board-certified neurosurgeon
David R. Blatt, M.D.

she says. “My pain is gone, and that’s all I can ask for. The difference is so dramatic; it is truly a miracle.”

Now that she is on her feet again, Ellsworth is back to work helping others as a group specialist in a nonprofit mental health agency. ■