

Patient Story: Posttraumatic Arthritis and Total Knee Replacement



It's not easy to get to Robert Wentzell's mountainous backwoods home in Breckenridge, Colorado. At 11,700 feet above sea level, Bob and his wife Rose have to hike or snowmobile up from the road to reach their off-grid cabin. Bob has spent most of his life in this remote destination, and for him, it's a routine commute.

In November of 1981, Bob was heading down the mountain to his car on a Snurfer Board, the first marketed snowboard. "Snurfing was an early version of snowboarding, consisting of a board the length and shape of a skateboard with a rope to hold on," Bob explains. Although fun, snurfing was dangerous. Bob crashed and injured his knee, sending him to the hospital with a tear in his left anterior cruciate ligament, or ACL.

Thirty years ago, minimally invasive procedures to repair ACLs and other ligaments had not yet been developed. Bob's surgery involved fully opening his knee, and he was in a full leg cast for six weeks. In the years that followed, Bob experienced intermittent pain. About ten years ago, an x-ray revealed that Bob's knee joint had deteriorated, and was bone-on-bone. "My insurance policy at the time considered my knee pain as a pre-existing condition, so I avoided getting it checked out," he says. "There was not a diagnosis or recommendation for knee replacement."

Over the last five years, Bob's pain progressed to a point where it was unbearable. In June of 2009, the volunteer physician at the local clinic referred him to the Colorado Joint Replacement Center to see Douglas Dennis, MD. "I had no idea what was going to happen when I went to see Dr. Dennis," Bob recalls. Dr. Dennis recommended total knee replacement; however Bob had no insurance or other economic means to cover the cost. With no other alternative, Bob continued to live with disabling pain for two more years. He rode the stationary bike at his house to keep his legs strong. He had pain with every step, and developed back and neck problems from favoring his right knee. He was no longer able to ski.

In 2011, Bob received a phone call from Dr. Dennis that he will never forget. "I was astonished when Dr. Dennis told me I was a candidate for Operation Walk USA 2011."

Operation Walk USA, a nationwide initiative sponsored by the Hip Society, the Knee Society, and the American Association of Hip and Knee Surgeons, provided pro bono total joint replacements to patients across America who are otherwise unable to receive necessary surgical care because of their financial situation. On December 2 and 3, 2011, 58 joint replacement surgeons from 16 different states donated their time and talents to perform much-needed procedures on 85 patients.

Finally, Bob's opportunity arrived. In early December of last year, he received knee replacement surgery. He is still recovering from the procedure, but is starting to become more mobile with minimal pain. Bob worked hard in physical therapy three times a week for six weeks after his surgery. He continues to exercise on his own daily.

Bob is grateful for Dr. Dennis and the surgeons that donated their services to Operation Walk USA 2011. He hopes to regain enough stamina to get back to his woodworking career and continue to earn a living as he ages. "I will be happy to be able to garden, fix my roof and do other big projects around my house," he says.



Bob's arm, shoulder, and ankle are also affected by arthritis pain. Bob hopes to see continued research on treatments and procedures to preserve mobility and prevent permanent loss of joint health.

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