

By Jerry Carroll | Chronicle Staff Writer

DOCTOR OF LAST RESORT FOR PAINFUL BACKS Surgeon lets spinal sufferers hold their heads high again

"I hurt," she said. "I hurt all the time." Bravely smiling, Nadine Perry, 51, a Stockton telephone operator, lay on a bed at Saint Francis Memorial Hospital in San Francisco waiting to be wheeled under the bright lights of Operating Room No. 7. Her husband loomed nearby, pale and wordless with worry.

The problem was her spine, a column of living bone trying to curve from vertical to horizontal. This pinched nerves in the pro- less, agonizingly. The bend, caused by osteoporosis, was already 44 degrees, and medical lore indicated that a further degree of curve would come with each year of call life. If you could call it a life.

A pain in the back is felt by 80 percent of Americans at some point in their lives, not including pains in the neck, usually a metaphor for boss but sometimes an excruciating physical pain. Back injuries cost \$128 billion a year in medical costs and lost productivity. The average back injury claim, 85 percent involving the lower back, costs employers \$18,365. There are 46,000 disabling back injuries each year.

From the small back strain suffered by the weekend gardener or tennis player to the worker who falls from the roof, it is the second leading cause of absenteeism, responsible for 100 million lost days of work a year.

Buoyant and upbeat, spine surgeon Kenneth Light, 43, a tall and muscular two-time All-American diver at Cornell his collegiate days, stood alongside Perry's bed for show of bedside manner. Light the founder and medical co-director of the San Francisco Spine Center, reckons he has done about a thousand operations.

Doctor of Last Resort

More than 90 percent of the people who have back trouble get well on their own using nothing more sophisticated than bed rest and aspirin. Light is a doctor of last resort, the kind about 1 or 2 percent of the chronic sufferers turn to when nothing else has worked — not the therapy, the injections, not the previous surgeries.

A carpenter he operated on had nine previous surgeries. Every one left him a little worse off. When Light opened him up, he found a loose screw left behind in the spinal canal from the last operation.

"They're at their wit's end, and this is the last straw," said Light.

Some chronic sufferers have lost their jobs, had marriages crack up and been told they're crazy. Others are advised to learn to live with their pain because it's never going to go away. A lot of doctors won't have anything to do with them, particularly if they've had back surgery before. Depression is common, as is addiction to pain-killers.

Spinal surgery isn't cheap. It can cost more than \$55,000, counting hospitalization. It's also scary stuff with no room for error. Light admits to feeling fear before every operation.

The specialist Light studied with in Buffalo, N.Y., Edward Simmons — a legend in the field and a pioneer in making spinal surgery a speciality of its own within orthopedic surgery — gave him the courage to make the backbone his focus by demonstrating techniques few other doctors had mastered. Simmons, 62, was a founder of the Scoliosis Research Society in 1966.

"Spinal deformity didn't used to get much better 'said. "When we first formed, we said maybe we

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wouldn't need to meet every year. But it has grown so much we didn't have enough room for the people who had things to offer. We had to insist that the papers be shorter."

Simmons uses a lot of "very" in describing his former pupil. "He gets along with patients very well, he's very devoted, conscientious, very honest and very good. If I had to have surgery, I'd select him to do it." Light smiled when told. It was like being welcomed to the top of Olympus.

Perry was rolled into the pale green operating room, and anesthesiologist F.T. Choy put her into dreamland at 8:20 a.m. "Think of the foothills," he said as she went under.

Light has the same team whenever he operates. "He expects nothing but perfection from everyone," said physician's assistant Veronica Gonzales. Chest surgeon Jack Ghatan opened Perry up from her front side, and her heart and lungs were nudged aside to give Light access to the spine.

Nothing worked, so Mainzer was operated on first by a neurosurgery and then by an orthopedic surgeon at the University of California at San Francisco. A second disc went out on him.

"I was finally flat on my back in bed or crawling around on the floor." A colleague at Saint Francis told him about Light.

Two discs were removed and bone from his hip was used to fuse the spine. Mainzer is back working full time, plays golf "and even a little tennis."

Stephanie Hendrick, 38, a talk show producer, thinks her problem might have begun in 1961 when she was in a car accident. When the pain got really bad, "I couldn't stop crying. I'm a very stoic person, but it was worse than childbirth. I was told by a general practitioner not to have surgery under any circumstances, that I could be paralyzed or die. The pain was so bad any of these would be preferable."

When she awoke from the anesthetic, her back pain was gone.

"I had a total, complete recovery. People said I'd have limited rotation in my neck, but I can't tell any difference. I think more clearly because I'm not in pain all the time.

Light worked painstakingly on Perry. Puffs of smoke rose from cauterized blood vessels. Screws were attached and a cable strung to straighten her spine. The degree of curvature was reduced to zero.

"It went very well," Light said afterward. Perry spent two days in intensive care and then they had her back on her feet.

Light went from that to another operating room to rid a small woman of terrible leg pains caused by a pinched sciatic nerve. The only bad thing to happen all day was when he went to Candlestick Park that night. The Giants lost.

"What a bummer," he said.

Ballet dancer Sarah Oppenheimer, 35, of Mill Valley woke up one morning in January after a heavy season of "Nutcracker" and could hardly move. Many back stories begin with people waking up in the morning. Light is a neighbor, so she called him.

An MRI gave the bad news. She had two herniated discs in her neck, one of which was sticking into her spinal chord. "He said I was at risk of being paralyzed." During six hours of surgery, the disc was removed and replaced by bone taken from her hip.

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“My long neck is the best part of my ballet body. I asked Ken if he would make the incision small.

He told me afterward that he made it too small and it meant another hour on the operating table” It was six hours in all, fairly standard for spinal surgery, although Light has spent as much as 12 hours on a patient.

Wearing an elaborate neck brace, Oppenheimer returned to ballet class within four weeks and has now resumed her career. She danced the “Nutcracker” again last season with Kirov ballet spar Nikolia Kavaniaev.

Crawling on the Floor

“Most physicians,” said radiologist Frank Mainzer, 59, of Novato, “are very suspicious of other physicians and don’t like things done to us. But my life was in chaos.” He got a herniated disc from playing tennis. “I had every possible nonsurgical treatment there was short of a tincture of thyme to alleviate pain and allow me to go about my life.”