Two surgeons are better than one for innovative spinal procedure at Methodist Hospitals

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From left, Dr. Ashish Patel and Dr. Elian Shepherd, spine surgeons at Methodist Hospital in Merrillville, perform a medical subtrac osteotomy on a patient to straighten out his spine.

At Methodist Hospitals, two fellowship-trained spinal surgeons are on the forefront of an
innovative procedure that gives patients with disabling conditions a better chance of a normal life with fewer complications.

Dr. Ashish Patel and Dr. Elian Shepherd are spinal surgeons who perform delicate scoliosis operations together. This reduces the surgery’s duration as well as blood loss and complications. That adds up to better outcomes.

Scoliosis is an abnormal sideways curvature of the spine that occurs most often during the growth spurt just before puberty. Though scoliosis can occur in patients with conditions such as cerebral palsy and muscular dystrophy, the cause of most cases is unknown.

Some cases of scoliosis are mild, but spine deformities can become more severe as a child grows and can be disabling. An especially severe spinal curve can reduce the amount of space in the chest, interfering with lung function.

It’s those patients with severe deformities that Dr. Patel and Dr. Shepherd treat. In the last nine months, they have performed more than 200 spinal surgeries together. Dr. Patel says that all patients have shown substantial improvement in function and standing posture.

“The results have been promising,” Dr. Patel said. “Our patients have less risk of complications, because we can get them out of surgery quicker. Working together, we can perform spinal fusion steps simultaneously.”

An article published in ScienceDirect, a journal of scientific, medical, and technical research, concluded that the two-surgeon approach significantly lowered the risks associated with complex scoliosis spinal surgery. Another study published by www.spine-deformity.org, the journal of the Scoliosis Research Society, showed that dual-surgeon procedures reduced operating room time an average of two and a half hours from a single-surgeon procedure.

“By reducing time on the operating table from seven and a half hours to five hours, the patient has a significant reduction in blood loss,” Dr. Shepherd explained. “For a spinal patient, that is a major improvement.”

Dr. Shepherd has been a part of the Methodist Hospitals surgical team for 35 years. Dr. Patel joined Methodist 10 months ago, after spending a year in Germany performing scoliosis surgery. Both are fellowship trained, a point that Dr. Patel emphasized.

“Fellowship trained surgeons have the background and common practices to work together to the patients’ benefit,” he said.
“It has been an honor to team up with Dr. Shepherd,” Dr. Patel continued. “It has provided me with an opportunity to hone my craft with one of the leading spinal surgeons in the area.”

In the operating room, they work independently on separate aspects of the surgery. This technique is utilized at large academic tertiary spine centers in Chicago, San Francisco and other cities, according to Dr. Patel, who brought it with him from New York.

The surgeons discussed an operation performed on a woman who was in a horrific automobile accident.

Barbara Nannenga, DeMotte, suffered three breaks in her back in the accident Jan. 27, 2016.

Nannenga turned to Dr. Shepherd and Dr. Patel when her injury healed in the shape of a question mark, making sitting, standing, and walking extremely painful.

“She came to us almost one year after the accident,” Dr. Shepherd recalled. “She had been thrown from the vehicle.”

In a six-and-a-half-hour operation, the surgeons removed the misshapen bones and inserted two titanium rods to place her spine in proper alignment.

Nannenga can now walk, sit, and stand normally.

“Dr. Shepherd and Dr. Patel are amazing,” she said. “They both have incredible bedside manner, and their surgical skills got me back on my feet. I don’t even use pain medicines.”

“Many patients who come to us are at the end of hope,” Dr. Patel explained. “They are miserable due to spinal deformities. For them, we are their last chance at a normal life.”

And their innovative approach to the delicate surgery give those patients that opportunity.