



Joe Kilraine

DEGENERATIVE DISC DISEASE

In April 2000, Joe Kilraine suffered a fall that resulted in a broken knee and damage to his spinal column due to degenerative disc disease (DDD) that left him in chronic pain and significantly disabled. For several years, Joe tried every conservative treatment he could find for his back pain, including narcotic pain relievers on which he became dependent.

DDD is an inevitable aspect of aging, however, not all patients are in pain. Joe was, as a result of his fall, and he needed surgery on his spine. DDD causes compression of the nerve roots, with pain often radiating down the legs or into the feet. It may also be associated with numbness and tingling. The most common surgical treatment for patients with DDD historically has been spinal fusion. In this procedure, spinal vertebrae are fused together to strengthen and stabilize the spine. The major disadvantage to this procedure is that most patients lose mobility and flexibility in the area of the spine where the fusion took place.

Joe felt strongly that this surgical procedure was not for him. He began to look for an alternative, and discovered a new technology in spinal surgery, artificial disc replacement, was on the horizon. Like hip and knee replacement surgery, artificial discs have the potential to return patients to a pain-free lifestyle with full function and mobility.

Joe soon discovered that the use of artificial discs was being studied in several clinical trials in the United States. Unfortunately Joe did not qualify for these studies because he had DDD at more than one level of his spine. Joe's continued search led him all the way to Europe where they have been performing artificial disc replacement surgery for several years.

At his own expense, Joe traveled to Vienna, Austria where he underwent a surgical procedure in which three of the discs in his lumbar spine were replaced with artificial discs. After four years of pain and disability and a total loss of his quality of life, Joe finally found relief. "I walked the next day after my surgery and now a year later, I am well on my road to recovery," Joe said.

The FDA recently approved the use of an artificial disc device for patients with DDD, but with limited restrictions, including involvement of more than one level of the lumbar spine. While this has been a welcome step forward, additional research is needed, especially for patients like Joe whose disease does not fall within the current criteria. Continued funding for the development of surgical procedures and technologies that can change a person's life by returning them to a pain-free and productive life is not only worthwhile, but also essential.