

Back in the Saddle

Robotic Assisted Surgery Gets Prostate Cancer Patient Back on His Bike Again



As a retired school superintendent, when Dan Doerhoff learned he might need surgery for prostate cancer, he did his homework. “I discovered I might have prostate cancer by accident. I was having a physical for my pilot’s license when the doctor suggested I have a routine PSA screening test,” the 60-year-old said. “I didn’t have any prostate cancer symptoms, but my PSA level was elevated.” Doerhoff’s doctor repeated the test a few months later, only to find his PSA level had climbed again.

At that point, Doerhoff’s doctor referred him to a urologist who confirmed the prostate cancer diagnosis. The specialist discussed treatment options with him, but one in particular appealed to Doerhoff. “The urologist said I was a good candidate for a surgery called a laparoscopic robotic prostatectomy,” Doerhoff said. Although the doctor didn’t perform the surgery himself, he referred Doerhoff to a Liberty Hospital urologist who does, Justin Albani, MD.

After meeting with Dr. Albani, Doerhoff researched the procedure in depth, talking with other physicians, watching the surgery online, and discussing it with his brother. “My brother was diagnosed with prostate cancer a year earlier, but he had the traditional open surgery,” Doerhoff said. “Although his surgery was very successful, he does have some bladder control issues. With the robotic surgery, that risk is reduced. I focused on the facts and decided this would be the best way to go for me,” Doerhoff said.



On Nov. 12, 2007, Doerhoff had his surgery at Liberty Hospital. During the operation, Dr. Albani used a robotic surgery system called the da Vinci to assist him. The da Vinci Surgical System allows the surgeon to view a three-dimensional image of the patient’s body. By greatly magnifying the area, the doctor is able to perform the delicate movements necessary to reduce possible damage to the sensitive nerves located near the prostate.

The robot itself consists of instrument arms that the surgeon moves during the operation. Each arm has a specific job to do, such as clamping, suturing or tissue manipulation. The surgeon controls the robot, positioning the instruments even more accurately than could be done with the human hand.

“The instruments are designed to have the same range of motion as the hand,” Dr. Albani said. “The advantage is that the robotic arms give you more control than you have with conventional laparoscopic or traditional open surgery.”

The result is a better surgery for the patient. “When we use the robot to perform this surgery, we are able to be very exact with our movements,” Dr. Albani said. “This means we can greatly reduce the patient’s blood loss, shorten their hospitalization and cut down on the amount of time it takes to recover.” Patients whose surgeons use the robot to assist with removing the prostate often return home the next day.

“Robotic-assisted surgery allows Liberty Hospital to offer its patients a higher level of care,” Dr. Albani said. “We believe these patients will do much better overall. They spend less time in the hospital and return to normal activities quicker.”



That was certainly the case for Doerhoff. He left the hospital just 24 hours after surgery to recover in the comfort of his own home. “I had one incision that was about two inches long where the prostate was removed, and five tiny incisions where the robotic arms were inserted,” Doerhoff said. “I was a little sore following surgery, but for the most part, I felt great.”

In fact, he found himself feeling so good, he wanted to get back to his active lifestyle as quickly as possible. “I wasn’t able to lift heavy objects or exercise for several weeks, and that included riding my motorcycle,” Doerhoff said. “I really missed that.”

Now he’s back to 100 percent and is cancer free. “Just before Christmas I

had a follow-up PSA test, and I got a very good report. I can fly, hunt and ride my motorcycle again. I have been pleasantly surprised by how well everything went,” Doerhoff said. “I would definitely recommend this surgery to anyone diagnosed with prostate cancer.”

Robotic-assisted surgery, especially to remove the prostate, is gaining in popularity. In fact, about 60 percent of all surgeries to remove the prostate are now being performed using the da Vinci robotic platform. “Northland area patients are very fortunate that Liberty Hospital has made a commitment to this advanced technology,” Dr. Albani said. “We are able to provide the most effective treatment possible for our patients.”