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# 14 things to know about the spine industry in 2020

Alan Condon - Wednesday, June 24th, 2020 [Print](#) | [Email](#)

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The first half of 2020 brought big moves in the spine device industry, key milestones in spine surgery innovation and new challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Here are 14 of the biggest developments in the spine industry so far this year:

- Augmented reality made waves in spine surgery.** In early June, Baltimore-based Johns Hopkins Medicine surgeons performed the first augmented reality-assisted spine surgeries with Augmedics' Xvision Spine System surgical guidance system.
- Omar Ishrak retired.** The former Medtronic CEO called time on a nine-year stint as head of the medical device company in April. Geoff Martha, former senior vice president of strategy and business development, assumed the role of CEO.
- Artificial disc replacement celebrated 20 years in the U.S.** Six spine surgeons from Plano-based Texas Back Institute, including Scott Blumenthal, MD — who performed the country's first artificial disc replacement — shared insights on the future of the procedure.
- The COVID-19 pandemic left surgeons pondering the "new normal" in spine.** Eleven surgeons from across the country spoke to *Becker's Spine Review* about the future of the field.
- Device companies took action to control costs during the COVID -19 pandemic.** Production halts, furloughs and hiring freezes were rife in the spine industry as device companies sought to maintain liquidity during a challenging financial period.
- Spine surgeons put their minds to use** to assist patients and staff during the pandemic. Melissa Erickson, MD, of Duke University in Durham, N.C., remodelled surgical helmets into respirators and Dusty Richardson, MD, of Billings (Mont.) Clinic developed 3D-printed masks with a replaceable filter to stem the spread of COVID-19.
- Up to 43 million people were projected** to [lose](#) their employer-sponsored coverage, denying orthopedic surgery access to many patients in the U.S.
- The M&A market continues to see action in the spine and orthopedic space.** Medtronic [kicked off](#) the year with the acquisition of spinal cord stimulation developer Stimpsonics. In May, Stryker [proposed](#) a \$2.3 billion offering to fund the acquisition of Wright Medical Group, a device company focusing on orthopedic extremities and biologics.
- Spine surgeons settled anti-kickback allegations** with the Department of Justice. Colorado neurosurgeon William Choi, MD, [agreed](#) to pay \$2.35 million to resolve anti-kickback and False Claims Act violation allegations and California spine surgeon Jeffrey Carlson, MD, [agreed](#) to pay \$1.75 million to settle allegations that he accepted kickbacks from device company SpineFrontier.
- A life sentence was upheld for a former spine surgeon.** In May, a federal appeals court dismissed arguments from former spine surgeon Johnny Clyde Benjamin Jr., MD, who was sentenced to life in prison for the death of a woman who overdosed on counterfeit oxycodone pills.
- Several key partnerships have been forged.** Santa Monica, Calif.-based Pacific Neuroscience Institute [opened](#) a surgical skills lab with John Wayne Cancer Institute, and Tampa (Fla.) General Hospital partnered with Louisville, Ky.-based Kindred Healthcare to develop a \$35 million rehab facility for spinal cord injury.
- At least 25 spine surgeons** [joined](#) new organizations, retired or received promotions so far this year.
- Two Colorado spine practices agreed to merge.** In October, Fort Collins-based Orthopaedic & Spine Center of the Rockies and Longmont-based Front Range Orthopedics & Spine will combine, bringing together more than 85 providers and eight clinical locations.
- Neurosurgeons star on TV screens.** Netflix debuted "Lenox Hill" June 10, a docuseries following the lives of four physicians at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City, including neurosurgeon John Boockvar, MD. The story of former neurosurgeon Christopher Duntsch will be detailed in a true-crime TV show in the fall.

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