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Making Elective Surgeries Safe During COVID-19

This local facility will test every patient and begin with less risky operations.

BY WILL MADDOX | PUBLISHED IN HEALTHCARE BUSINESS | MAY 1, 2020 | 10:00 AM



Next week, the Texas Health Center for Diagnostics and Surgery (THCDS) in Plano will begin performing elective surgeries, delivering relief to those who have been waiting to have operations and providing welcome income to those who have had their business almost completely shut down during the pandemic.

Dr. Peter Derman is a minimally invasive and endoscopic spine surgeon at the Texas Back Institute who often performs surgeries at THCDS. His group stopped doing non-emergent surgeries a week before it was required to do so, and though it hasn't had to lay off anyone in the meantime, most people were not working at full capacity.

Texas didn't reach predicted COVID-19 levels, and hospitals have been able to handle the cases without extreme PPE shortages. Because hospitals have implemented strict testing protocols, Derman and others at TCCDS believe it is safe to move forward with non-emergent surgeries.

While the postponed back and spine procedures were not considered emergent, it meant that many were suffering greatly. "Non-emergent does not mean not important," Derman says. "Patients were experiencing severe pain, with numerous patients who can't walk and were waiting indefinitely for this to happen."

In preparation for elective procedures to begin, the hospital is taking several measures to make sure patients are safe while getting the operations they need. The first surgeries being in done are with healthier, lower risk patients, as well as smaller surgeries with shorter hospital stays. Healthier patients and smaller surgeries were chosen to make sure that the precautions are in fact protecting patients and staff from COVID-19. Most of Derman's operations are endoscopic or non-invasive, so his patients usually head home the day of their surgery. If the plan works, Derman and others will move to more vulnerable patients and complicated surgeries, where exposure to the virus might do more damage.

THCDS is calling patients who have surgeries scheduled two to three ahead of time to screen them and make sure they don't have any COVID-19 symptoms, and then they are tested for the virus 24 hours before surgery, when they are cleared to come to the hospital for the operation. Staff is being screened as well, and everyone from the janitor to the CEO is wearing a mask. Visitors are being screened for symptoms, and the number of visitors are limited as well. Finally, the operating rooms are under new protocols to limit the number of people who come in and out during surgery. "With these safeguards in place, the hospital is one of the safest places you can be from a COVID-19 perspective," Derman says.

Because THCDS is not an acute care hospital, there never were any COVID-19 patients there, which also reduces the risk of spreading the virus during surgeries. Derman says patients' nervousness about the virus is mostly relative to the severity of their pain. Those who are suffering are ready have their surgery yesterday and will jump through whatever hoops are necessary to have their procedure, while those who don't have as acute a need may be waiting a bit before they come back to the hospital. "The majority have been waiting a long time and calling every day to have their surgery," Derman says. "Now that we have the safeguards in place, I know we will be able to take care of them."

Looking ahead, Derman says that they will look at the results of their protocols in order to open up the facility to more vulnerable patients and more complicated surgeries. "It is still a work in progress and it is a day by day process."

While COVID-19 has interrupted surgeries, Derman says the move to virtual appointments has actually been a welcome change. As insurers shifted how they reimburse virtual appointments, it made telehealth more feasible for the pre-surgery and follow-up appointments between the patients and physicians.

The appointments can be done without being in the same room, and for patients who travel from all over Texas and even out of state to have their operation done by the Texas Back Institute, having a telemedicine appointment can save a long commute or even a flight. It also can be helpful for those with limited mobility, work or childcare commitments, or other obstacles to coming into the clinic. "We feel that doing appointments remotely is the safest environment for everyone," Derman says.

While some surgeries are firing back up, Derman is encouraging residents to seek medical care if they need it. While it is right to consider the risks when venturing out, North Texas data is showing that people are delaying medical care, leading to more intense and sometimes irreversible symptoms. He says providers are taking precautions and patients should seek care when they need it. "We have been thoughtful about how we can provide the services in a safe environment, and we encourage patients to be open minded about seeking care."

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