

From This Day Forward

Weeks of back pain and sleepless nights left Kelly DeGroot feeling “knackered” (definition: British for tired, exhausted).



Chad Abernathy, MD
Neurosurgeon
Cedar Neurological Surgeons, PC

Originally from England, Kelly is known for her saucy, fun-loving personality and carefree demeanor.

But six weeks of severe neck and arm pain left her feeling unable to do “Sweet Fanny Adams” (definition: nothing) without pain. “I couldn’t get comfortable. I couldn’t even find a way to lie down to sleep at night,” she remembers. And – she was getting married in Mexico in two months!

She went to see her family doctor, who ordered an MRI. The next day, Kelly had a consultation with neurosurgeon Chad Abernathy, MD. Her diagnosis: C-7 cervical radiculopathy, due to a classic case of a ruptured, herniated or slipped disc – all equivalent terms for one painful condition.

“In a bad case of radiculopathy there is a lot of pain. It hurts day and night – you can’t get away from it,” explains Dr. Abernathy. “Her seventh cervical nerve was compressed by a large, right C-6-7 disc extrusion.

“This was an acute event. She bent, twisted or lifted some object or performed some activity that caused a portion of the cartilage to break loose from the disc. It is an extremely common event.”

Kelly tried using a heating pad and massage therapy to manage her pain, but her condition continued to deteriorate. Prior to surgery, Dr. Abernathy says, “You usually attempt conservative management, such as physical therapy. I give my patients a list of things they can try, including heat, massage, physical therapy, chiropractic care, trigger point injections, epidural steroid injections, anti-inflammatories, analgesics, acupuncture and

biofeedback. Unfortunately, conservative management does not typically resolve a large acute disc extrusion that is causing lifestyle-impairing pain.”

Kelly decided to have surgery. Although the spinal cord and nerves lie in the center of the vertebrae, Dr. Abernathy performed the surgery from the front of her neck. “In her case, this was a large disc extrusion with a relatively large osteophyte (bone spur) compressing the spinal cord as well. An anterior approach was deemed more beneficial to remove the osteophyte and disc extrusion, as well as stabilize that level to prevent recurrence.”

Dr. Abernathy was assisted by fellow neurosurgeon Loren Mouw, MD. They generally assist each other, as they feel a second experienced surgeon contributes to the success of these complicated types of cases.

They fused the vertebrae to ensure stabilization of the spine. “Dr. Mouw and I removed the entire disc and placed a bone graft between the vertebrae in place of the disc. Then, we bolstered that graft with an anterior titanium cervical plate that bridges the vertebra and is held with screws.”

The vertebrae bone came from a cadaver. “Others (surgeons) may utilize a plastic implant, different screw and plate systems, or bone from the sternum or hip. We have found this approach has the highest fusion rate and best results in our practice.”

Dr. Abernathy has performed over 5,000 fusion procedures of this type in his nearly 30-year career.

After surgery Kelly went to recovery for an hour, and then to a private Mercy suite where

she received patient education by specially trained nurses. “They had me up and walking within an hour. The difference in pain was already like night and day,” says Kelly. She was released the next morning and headed home for a two-week recovery period.

Once home, patients usually can perform most of their normal activities, although they may not lift anything that weighs more than 30 pounds. About 20 percent of Dr. Abernathy’s patients receive follow-up physical therapy. Kelly was one of those individuals and she found the physical therapy was very helpful for her final recovery. She had a follow-up visit with Dr. Abernathy two weeks after surgery, and again in six weeks. At the second visit, she had a cervical spine X-ray to confirm proper fusion and demonstrate that nothing had shifted or failed.

“This surgery is the ‘bee’s knees’ (translation: really cool). My beach wedding was ‘bloody marvelous’ (no translation needed)!” exclaims Kelly.



Celebrating after Kelly’s beach wedding are wedding guests (left to right): Lisa Vrba, Collette Blake, Kelly & Jason DeGroot and Scott Vrba.

