



No pain, plenty to gain

Andrews' Hickman revolutionizes technique

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While Dr. James Andrews receives accolades throughout the orthopedic and sports medicine world, there is a quiet revolution going on behind the scenes.

The revolution is that surgeries – even the bone-sawing, bone-drilling surgeries – are relatively pain free thanks to the advanced methods performed by Dr.

Gregory Hickman. Hickman isn't as well known as Dr. Andrews, but he is a rising star in the world of orthopedic anesthesia.

Anesthesiologists from around the U.S. regularly trail Hickman on his appointed rounds at the Andrews Institute to learn his technique for using ultrasound to guide the numbing medication to surround the nerve or nerve bundle that sends the

•See PAIN, Page 2A ▶



Joe Culpepper/Gulf Breeze News
Drs. Gregory Hickman (right), Jim Eckerd of Phoenix (left) and Tim Madren (Lafayette, Ind.) study an ultrasound image.

PAIN: Hickman 'pushes the envelope'

Continued from page 1A

message of pain back to the spinal column. Once surrounded by the numbing medication, the pain message is blocked for about 18 hours.

For the following three days, an elastometric reservoir, shaped like a ball, releases a steady stream of numbing medication to the same nerve, allowing the patient to rest and recuperate at home, pain-free, and without the complications caused by narcotics.

The results are truly revolutionary. Patients such as Ben Randazzo, an executive from the Chicago area, are able to travel to the Andrews Institute in Gulf Breeze, have surgery, and fly home the next day.

Randazzo was "pleasantly surprised" by the lack of pain he experienced.

"When they told me we can control the pain, it made me more comfortable," Randazzo said. Dr. Lonnie Paulos performed the surgery, a knee inlay procedure, on a Tuesday, and Randazzo was able to fly home on Wednesday.

"What was nice is that I had this pain pump that automatically dispensed the medicine to the spot at certain intervals," Randazzo said, talking about the On-Q C-bloc. Unfortunately, Randazzo decided to pull out the pump on Friday so he could begin his physical therapy.

"I said, 'this is bad,'" Randazzo recalled, finally experiencing the pain he was avoiding by using the pump.

Dr. Hickman began working with Andrews in Birmingham, Ala., in 1992, and he joined the team in Gulf Breeze when the Andrews Institute opened.

Originally from Knoxville, he attended Tennessee Tech University before completing his undergraduate degree at the University of

Memphis, and attended medical school at East Tennessee State University in Johnson City. He interned at Charleston Medical University of South Carolina and trained at University of Alabama-Birmingham.

Hickman had a personal interest in post-operative pain management after enduring multiple surgeries to remove kidney stones, and he decided to focus his practice on preventing surgical pain.

"I always want to do the most progressive, newest thing out there," Hickman said.

That led to his using ultrasound technology to pinpoint the nerves affected during the surgery, surrounding them with numbing medicine. He began doing this procedure six months before he transferred to the Gulf Breeze facility.

"It is accurate, it is stronger, and it lasts longer," Hickman said, describing the benefits of the procedure. He is the only anesthesiologist in a 300-mile radius using this technique, he said.

Limiting the pain medication to the affected nerve allows patients to forgo general anesthesia, with its complications including nausea, confusion, constipation, and difficulty in breathing and, in some severe instances, death.

Patients are released from the surgery after a few short hours to spend the next few days recuperating at home, but they always leave with Hickman's cell-phone number, just in case they experience pain, a call that Hickman says is very rare.

Andrews knows that reducing the amount of pain a patient experiences is part of the overall surgical experience, and he gives Hickman free reign.

"He's great," Hickman said of Andrews. "Even back then, he let me do whatever I wanted and depended on me to do what I do for his patients. He told me, 'I want you to push the envelope on the cases we can do.'"