

Getting it straight

By Mary Beth Schweigert

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LANCASTER COUNTY, PA - TO 18-YEAR-OLD AMANDA NISSLEY, the thought of back surgery felt like a punch in the stomach. In sixth grade, Nissley was diagnosed with scoliosis, an abnormal curvature of her spine, which was shaped like an "S."

Nissley wore a special brace designed to stabilize her spine. But after three years of wearing the brace for 18 hours every day, her scoliosis hadn't improved.

Nissley's back hurt when she took off the brace, and she was losing muscle tone. The Manheim Central senior's stomach also looked slanted.

Nissley saw a second doctor, who recommended major spinal surgery.

"It was like a bowling ball hit (my) stomach," she says. "It was just kind of like dread hanging over (my) head."

Nissley sought an alternative approach with chiropractor Dr. Clayton Stitzel, of Lancaster Spinal Health Center, Lititz.

Stitzel, a charismatic former Manheim Central football player, is among a handful of chiropractors unveiling an innovative treatment for scoliosis, an age-old medical mystery with no known cure.

Stitzel serves on the board of directors for the CLEAR Institute, a chiropractic research and education group that advocates treating scoliosis with exercise therapy, special spinal adjustments and vibratory stimulation. The institute hopes to train chiropractors worldwide in its new treatment system, which it bills as a long-awaited alternative to ineffective braces and invasive surgery.

Stitzel's special interest in scoliosis was piqued by a patient with a severe case who was considering surgery.

Using the CLEAR Institute protocol, Stitzel reduced his patient's spinal curve enough that she no longer needed surgery, which Stitzel says is risky and often ineffective.

Stitzel, who has trained fellow chiropractors in Orlando and Dallas, will expand his scoliosis lecture schedule in 2007.

He loves working on a puzzle that dates as far back as Hippocrates.

"This is a 5, 6,000-year-old mystery," he says. "We get to be the ones who finally put the final pieces of the puzzle together. ..."

"That's what we hope to do."

According to the National Scoliosis Foundation, scoliosis affects 2 to 3 percent of the population, or about 6 million Americans.

Scoliosis usually first develops in children ages 10 to 15. It affects both genders equally, but girls are eight times more likely to require treatment.

Scoliosis can limit activity, diminish self-esteem and cause pain and physical deformity. Severe scoliosis puts pressure on the heart and decreases lung capacity, shortening a person's life span or even killing them, Stitzel says.

The severity of scoliosis is measured in the angle of the spinal curvature.

Patients with minor curves might not need treatment. Traditional treatments include braces for moderate curves, or surgery for severe cases.

A brace, Stitzel says, might keep a patient's scoliosis from getting worse, but it won't correct an existing curve.

Surgery to insert a rod into the spine is expensive and can lead to permanent disability, he says.

Traditional chiropractic adjustments may reduce pain but won't correct the angle and can even make it worse, Stitzel says.

Chiropractors have recently joined the hunt for a proven, cost-effective way to treat scoliosis.

"In physical medicine," Stitzel says, "scoliosis is the big prize."

Stitzel and his CLEAR Institute colleagues hope to reduce the spinal curvature caused by scoliosis, or even correct it entirely.

A small study of the new approach showed an average angle reduction of 62 percent, Stitzel says. The study was encouraging, he says, but more research needs to be done. Stitzel is the only CLEAR Institute-trained chiropractor in Lancaster County. He hopes to eventually offer training in his Lititz office. Stitzel's scoliosis patients come to his clinic from as far away as Texas and Vermont. He has consistently seen curve reductions of 50 to 75 percent. Stitzel measures a patient's progress with precision X-rays taken before, during and after treatment. He uses a protocol called "mix, fix and set," designed to reposition the spine and its supporting soft tissue. The treatment takes time - and specialized equipment. Exercises done on "wobble" chairs stretch ligaments. Vibrating traction chairs contract and strengthen skeletal muscles. Since the approach is so new, Stitzel and his colleagues invented many of their tools. Stitzel modified a plain old drill for targeted vibration therapy, and his father built the traction chair. Patients require about 36 hour-long treatments over four months, Stitzel says. Most insurance companies cover the treatments, which cost about \$3,000 to \$4,000 total, he says, but some carriers consider the protocol experimental. (By comparison, a scoliosis brace costs about \$6,500, Stitzel says.) The treatments aren't painful, he says, but patients may feel stiff or sore the next day. Patients do a few minutes of daily exercises at home, like lying on foam blocks or wearing head and body weights. Minimal rehab work - about 20 minutes a week - lasts indefinitely. "If the patient doesn't work, it doesn't work," Stitzel says. Nissley is now about four months into treatment. Her physical appearance has returned to normal, and recent X-rays showed a 43 percent decrease in her spinal curvature. "I actually feel like something is being done," Nissley says. "I'm expecting there will be some very good results from it." For more information, call the Lancaster Spinal Health Center, 627-3009, or e-mail drstitzel@yahoo.com. The office will be closed over the holidays.

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