

By Christopher Elliott

THE PAIN WAS GONE

When back pain is intolerable — and “incurable” — patients turn to a surgeon known as the doctor of last resort.

CAROL SCHROLE wanted to die. She couldn't work, couldn't sleep, couldn't move. Her pain seemed to sneer at cortisone injections, pills or physical therapy. It stung mercilessly. “It felt like the last 20 minutes of childbirth, except that it never stopped,” remembers Schrole, 58, a Merced, Calif., real estate agent. Doctor after doctor rendered the same diagnosis: The trouble was in her head, not in her lower neck. Imaginary. “I was ready to call Dr. Jack Kevorkian,” she says. Instead, Schrole phoned one more physician: Kenneth Light, known worldwide as the back pain doctor of last resort. Schrole had heard unbelievable stories of patients paralyzed with pain walking again, of people on the brink of suicide finding hope under his care. Before killing herself, she'd give Light a chance. Like Schrole, Light's patients usually feel desperate by the time they come to him. Often, they already have been treated at a top medical center, without success.

Says Light: “People ask me how I stand for 12 hours at a time in surgery. It's because I'm afraid. I don't want the patient to die.”

A Specialty Within A Specialty

“Without taking poetic license, he's one of a relative handful of spine surgeons willing to take on the failed back pain patient and do it well,” Edgar Dawson, professor of orthopedics at UCLA Medical Center, says of Light. The treatment does not come cheaply, of course. Surgical costs typically run \$67,500, though medical insurance often covers them.

Light ordered a magnetic scan of Schrole's spinal column, which revealed two damaged disks. During a three-hour procedure, he removed loose bone chips from a small incision in her neck and replaced part of the damaged spinal column with fresh bone donated from Schrole's pelvis. When she awoke, “the pain was gone,” she says.

About 30 million people suffer from serious back problems like Schrole's, according to the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons. Studies suggest one-third of those who go under the knife to correct back problems end up worse than before. Light, 47, the founder of the San Francisco Spine Center at Saint Francis Memorial Hospital, repairs botched spinal operations. It's a specialty within a specialty, requiring the steadiest of hands and nerves.

“If I slip and cut the spinal cord, the patient is paralyzed,” he says. “If I puncture a blood vessel, I have 10 seconds before the patient bleeds to death.”

In 3,000 operations, nothing of the sort has happened. But, notes anesthesiologist Hugh Vincent, “in this business, you're either a hero or a zero.” It's a fine line that elite surgeons walk every day.

Saving A Ballerina's Career

Sarah Oppenheimer, 39, of Mill Valley, Calif., woke one morning after an exhausting schedule as lead ballerina in Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* and couldn't move her neck. Taking powerful painkillers, her agony only grew worse. She thought she'd never dance again; tests indicated she might be right. In surgery, Light made a small cut in her neck and carefully picked damaged bone out of her spine,

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then fit in a new piece of bone. Two weeks later, Oppenheimer returned to ballet class; within six months, she danced in a Rudolf Nureyev tribute.

Says the unassuming, softspoken Light: "Probably 50 percent of my patients are essentially pain-free after surgery. My cases are severe, and no doctor can create a new spine."

Light understands severe back pain. He suffered spine damage while playing golf in his mid-30s. "I couldn't sit down, I couldn't brush my teeth. It felt like someone had shot me in the back," he recalls. "After that, I knew that my patients weren't lying."

How, to avoid back pain

Ninety-nine percent of people who suffer from back pain don't need surgery, says surgeon Kenneth Light. Common-sense ways to avoid damage to the spine:

Use your hands and knees when lifting heavy objects. Hold the weight close to your body. A 50-pound weight held at arms length puts as much as 1,200 pounds of pressure on the lowest disk of your spine.

Listen to your body. It tells you when your back is about to go out. Don't ignore that instinct.

Avoid repetitive movement. Heavy lifting, golf & gardening can throw your back out of whack by putting repeated strain on the same part of the spine.

Don't lift more than your body can handle. As a general rule, if you're over age 40, you shouldn't try to lift more than 30 pounds.