

By Charles Gallardo | Independent Journal reporter

PAIN MEETS ITS MATCH

Tiburon surgeon beating tough back ailments

On her 900-acre corn and soy bean farm near Garden Grove, Iowa, life was becoming unbearable in 1977 for Quita Bethards.

While her husband, Ronald, worked crops and tended cattle, the 47-year-old former nurse was secluded inside the farmhouse, nearly crippled with excruciating back and hip pain.

With the closest city, Des Moines, 80 miles away, Bethards began seeking information on her condition via the Internet, determined to put an end to her back problem and take back her life.

That's how she found the Web site of Tiburon spine surgeon Kenneth Light, medical director of the San Francisco Spine Center at Saint Francis Memorial Hospital. Bethards is among the many patients from around the world with chronic back pain and failed surgeries who have found Light in cyberspace.

Diagnosed with thoracic disc herniation, Bethards had her first back operation in May 1996 and the second in January 1997, both by the same Florida surgeon. One of her herniated discs was removed, but the pain still didn't go away.

"I knew I was getting worse," she said. "By summertime I was feeling so miserable."

Bethards said she started to have trouble walking, often stumbling and falling, and began to fear she might become paralyzed.

In July 1997, she went to the Mayo Clinic in Minneapolis, where she was put on strong painkillers and anti-inflammatory medication.

While the drugs helped mask the pain, she didn't want to become dependent on the medication, so decided to just rely on over-the-counter painkillers to make it through the day.

When her condition worsened in September, she flew to Dallas for a consultation with another spine surgeon. Put off by the doctor's uncaring attitude, she flew home to Iowa dejected.

After communicating with Light via e-mail and explaining her medical history, Bethards decided to head to San Francisco in October for a consultation.

"To my amazement, the disc they removed in Florida was not the herniated disc," Light said. Either the surgeon had removed the wrong disc, he said, or there had been two herniated discs and the Florida physician overlooked one of them.

Bethards went into the operating room on Nov. 25, where Light removed the other disc in a seven-hour operation.

"As soon as I opened my eyes, I could tell my back was straight. The hip pain was gone," Bethards said from her Iowa home.

Light, 47, specializes in what he calls the tough cases, with about half of his patients having undergone unsuccessful surgeries elsewhere. Others have very severe back problems or cannot get help where they live.

While only a fraction of his patients find him via his Web site, Light said, it offers patients —some of

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whom live in remote areas or have difficulty getting out and about due to debilitating pain — a quick and simple way to get a second opinion.

Light gets about 1,000 inquiries a month on the Internet. He replies to queries daily and offers reviews of CT scans and MRIs, both at no charge. If the patient wants a full diagnosis, the Spine Center schedules an appointment.

Currently, Light said, he treats some four to five patients a month

- about 1 percent of his practice
- that have found him on the Internet, but the number is growing.

On his office wall, Light has a photograph of Sarah Oppenheimer, a professional ballet dancer who lives in Mill Valley and one of his most dramatic success stories.

In 1992, Oppenheimer woke up and discovered she could not move her neck.

“I couldn’t even function, I was in so much pain,” she recalled. After Oppenheimer had an MRI, Light told her that her condition could lead to permanent paralysis if not treated immediately — a terrifying prospect for a woman whose career included dancing with the Dallas and San Francisco Opera ballets.

Light operated on Oppenheimer in March and by the summer she was back on stage.

“I had a really quick recovery because I was so determined,” she said. “I thought, ‘This is it, I’m going to get back on my pointe shoes.’”

Now 38, Oppenheimer is still dancing professionally. Last week, she performed at the Cowell Theater in San Francisco with New Shoes, Old Souls, a Bay Area dance company made up of older dancers.

Light, who received his medical degree from Cornell University, started his career as an orthopedic surgeon, entering private practice in 1980. In the early 1980s, he noticed that a lot of patients who had back surgery were not getting any better.

“I just couldn’t believe all these people would come to the office telling me about the same problems, and no one could do anything for them,” he said. “Patients who had prior surgery were really in trouble; no one would see them.”

In 1984, Light received a yearlong fellowship to study with renowned spine surgeon Edward Simmons at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Returning to San Francisco, he established the Spine Center in 1991.

From Simmons, he said, he learned the surgical techniques that have allowed him to deal successfully with patients who have given up all hope of being cured.

“What makes my day is finding the toughest case that no one can fix,” Light said. “To have the patient look at you and say, ‘Thank you doctor, you’ve really helped my life,’ that’s the most gratifying thing.”