



Dr. Marc Linson and his patient, Madeline Hernandez

# Not Your Typical Back Pain

SURGEON

HELPS LOCAL

WOMAN

OVERCOME

RARE,

COMPLICATED

SPINAL

PROBLEM

Sometimes being special can be extremely challenging. Take the case of Madeline Hernandez of Springfield. She'd been experiencing severe back pain for more than two years. She could barely walk.

An MRI showed Hernandez had multiple hemangiomas in the thoracic area of her spine. Hemangiomas are non-cancerous tumors of the bone that are fairly common, particularly in the spine. But in Hernandez's case, the tumors had broken free from the bone and expanded into her spinal canal, putting pressure on her spinal cord. This almost never happens.

Hernandez's husband, Israel, previously had successful surgeries with Dr. Marc Linson, a Baystate orthopedic surgeon with a special expertise in spine surgery. "I said, 'I don't want you to see anyone but Dr. Linson,'" Israel Hernandez recalls.

However, even Linson himself didn't know what to do, at least at first. "This was a very unusual situation, having the hemangiomas compressing the spinal cord like that," he says. "You just don't expect to see this happen. It was the first time I'd ever seen this."

After some research, Linson found that very few surgeons in the region had ever seen a case like Hernandez's. Only a few dozen cases like hers had ever been reported.

After more research and discussion with colleagues, Linson developed a plan of treatment. Before performing the delicate procedure to remove the hemangiomas, he first prescribed an embolization procedure to control the bleeding he knew could result from surgery.

At the time, this procedure wasn't available at Baystate, so Hernandez had to travel out of state for the embolization. "Fortunately," says Dr. Sherry Taylor, chief of Neurosurgery at Baystate, "we now have an outstanding neurosurgeon, Dr. Clemens Schirmer, who can perform this procedure at Baystate."

For Hernandez, surgery presented both a cause for optimism—her pain might finally be gone—and for grave concern—there was the real risk of paralysis if anything went wrong.

"The greatest challenge was that I didn't know what I would be dealing with once the surgery began," says Linson. "Usually when I'm asked how often I do a certain surgical procedure, I can say that I've done it hundreds or thousands of times. But certainly not in this case."

And, says Linson, there was a tangible risk that Hernandez could end up paralyzed. However, since her MRI showed that her spinal cord was already compromised by 50%, the pressure

being exerted on her spinal cord by the hemangiomas had already become dangerous.

Dr. Dennis S. Oh, director of Neurosurgical Oncology at Baystate, provided a second opinion. He agreed with the approach Dr. Linson was taking, and also agreed that there was a definite urgency to the case.

The surgery took 90 minutes. Unfortunately, Hernandez's bones had been weakened by the hemangiomas, so it was necessary for Linson to implant several hooks and rods to stabilize the area.

"I couldn't place any pressure on the spinal cord, because there is almost no tolerance in the spine for pressure before paralysis can occur," he says.

By the end of the surgery, Linson was able to remove all the hemangiomas without any major complications.

"I was always very confident," says Hernandez. "She says she knew soon after surgery that the procedure was successful because so much of her pain was gone."

A month after surgery, Linson prescribed radiation therapy for Hernandez. It's rare that radiation is used to treat anything but cancer, but it was necessary to completely neutralize the area where the tumors had grown, to ensure that they didn't return.

Dr. Seth Kaufman, a radiation oncologist at Baystate, supervised the radiation, which included four weeks of daily treatments. He says he was part of a team that included a medical physicist, medical dosimetrist, neuroradiologist, and a radiation therapist.

"Mrs. Hernandez's case required great coordination between different teams of specialists, from surgeons, nurses, and anesthesiologists, to radiation oncologists, radiation therapists, and more," says Linson. "This reflects the depth of the resources we have here at Baystate Medical Center. Only a top-tier hospital would be prepared to do all that was required in a case like this."

The Hernandez's are extremely grateful to Dr. Linson. "He has the experience, and he has the caring," says Israel Hernandez. "I've sent so many people to see him. I say to them, 'He will either help you or send you to the right person who will.'"

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