

New robotics surgery offers quicker recovery and better results.

# DA VINCI TECHNOLOGY Makes Abdominal Surgery a Cinch

By Angela Klinske



Dr. Michael Bennett, M.D. (left) and Dr. Jason Bennett, M.D. (far right) of Female Pelvic Medicine and Urogynecology stand in front of a da Vinci Surgical System. Also pictured, Ziomara Hidalgo, PA-C (a physician's assistant with the practice), is also trained and assists in da Vinci surgeries.

When Mary Beth Meijer woke up in the recovery room at St. Mary's Health Care in Grand Rapids, Mich., she thought she had realized her ongoing fear.

"My first thought was that they couldn't do the surgery," recalled Meijer, 52, who needed a complete hysterectomy.

After having undergone three previous abdominal surgeries and experiencing "significant abdominal symptoms" for the past five years, an evaluation at Cleveland Clinic revealed that a much-needed hysterectomy was out of the question because of the adhesions from previous surgeries. Specialists told her she'd have to wait out menopause before finding any relief.

But that was before da Vinci.

Da Vinci is the latest state-of-the-art surgical technology available to a growing number of patients with pelvic disorders. Touted as one of the most effective, least-invasive surgical options available today, the da Vinci Surgical System can offer all the potential benefits of a minimally invasive procedure, including less pain, less blood loss and less need for blood transfusions. Moreover, the da Vinci System can enable a shorter hospital stay, a quicker recovery and faster return to normal daily activities, such as eating and walking. Clinical studies also suggest the da Vinci System may help surgeons provide better clinical outcomes than conventional technologies allow.

"It's been amazing; almost a phantom experience," said Meijer, who did have the complete hysterectomy last August via da Vinci technology. Her surgery required only five dime-sized incisions and her uterus was expelled through the vagina. A typical hysterectomy

requires a cut across the entire abdomen, thus rendering a longer hospital stay and up to eight weeks recovery (vaginal hysterectomies do not require incisions, but do limit visibility of pelvic organs.)

Meijer had prepared for her post-operative care by setting up a support system for meals and for childcare for her son. But only four days after surgery, she didn't even need oral pain medication and, 10 days after surgery, she was riding her bike.

"It had never occurred to me that I shouldn't do that," said Meijer.

Dr. Kevin Brader, M.D., the gynecological oncologist at St. Mary's who performed Meijer's surgery, said this is a typical experience among his patients. Brader performed his first da Vinci surgery in April 2007. Since then, he's performed more than 200 procedures using da Vinci, about two thirds of his cases cancerous (and most of those for endometrial cancer).

## Gimmick or Quantum Leap?

Da Vinci provides surgeons with an alternative to both traditional open surgery and conventional laparoscopy, putting a surgeon's hands at the controls of a state-of-the-art robotic platform. The da Vinci System enables surgeons to perform even the most complex and delicate procedures through very small incisions with more precision than traditional surgical methods.

Initially, Brader, along with many of his colleagues, thought da Vinci was a gimmick. "But after you've done this, regular laparoscopic surgery is just so crude," said Brader. He adds, "The candidate who benefits most is one who is obese or is considered a complicated surgical patient. There's almost no limit... the heavier the patient, the more incremental benefit there is."

Dr. Stephen Dalm, F.A.C.O.O.G. of Grand Rapids, Mich. agrees. He's been performing benign gynecological surgery since the robotics technology became available in Grand Rapids two years ago.

"We thought this was going to be a fancy toy, so we were a little skeptical. It's dramatically improved the quality of surgery and recovery time for patients from major surgeries, such as hysterectomy," said Dr. Dalm, who describes a recent patient who had a hysterectomy at 4 p.m. and was ready to go home – pain-free – by 8 p.m. the same day.

Dr. Michael Bennett of Female Pelvic Medicine & Urogynecology Institute of Michigan, a division of Grand Rapids Women's Health, says it's the biggest breakthrough in laparoscopic surgery he's seen in his 30 years of practice.

To date, da Vinci has been used in everything from minimally invasive heart surgery to minimally invasive cancer surgery, to treat conditions as diverse as prostate cancer, endometrial cancer, morbid obesity and mitral valve regurgitation, according to da Vinci's Web site, [www.davincisurgery.com](http://www.davincisurgery.com).

"As surgeons pick up this tool, they're learning to use it for different applications," said Dianna Darling, clinical sales representative for Intuitive Surgical, the company that sells the da Vinci Surgical System to hospitals around the world.

Hospitals in west Michigan that offer da Vinci include Saint Mary's Health Care, Spectrum Health-Butterworth Campus, Metro Health Hospital and Holland Hospital. Tom and Mickie Fox of Thomas S. Fox Diamond Jewelers donated funds to bring the da Vinci Surgical Systems – about \$1 million each – to west Michigan hospitals.

## Father and Son Approach

At Female Pelvic Medicine & Urogynecology Institute of Michigan, using the da Vinci Surgical System is a father and son endeavor. Dr. Michael Bennett, M.D. and Dr. Jason Bennett, M.D. work together (son Jason assisting) to provide their patients with an alternative in abdominal surgery.

"It's been an easy transition for us, and it's made our job much easier," said Jason Bennett who's been practicing female pelvic medicine for five years.

The father and son team say they complement each other with the strengths and experience they each bring to the table.

"We anticipate each other very well," said Jason.

The father-son team recently performed surgery on Monica Terrell, 34, of Grand Rapids, who suffered from pelvic prolapse, a condition in which pelvic floor muscles become weak or damaged and can no longer support the pelvic organs. Pelvic prolapse typically affects older women, especially women who have given birth.

Terrell, a mother of two and a custodian at Kentwood Public Schools, also suffered from interstitial cystitis, which was not being alleviated by medication.

She had the surgery in July, and though she's still recovering, Terrell says she's thankful the da Vinci surgery minimized the abdominal incisions that are common in surgery to correct prolapse.

"Each day is a better day," said Terrell, who has just started college to get her counseling degree. "The way I feel now, it's the best decision I could make," adds Terrell about the surgery. – WL