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When the remedy's a quick fix

Urgent Spine Care Center sees demand for same-day service

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Too often, Dr. Edward Kowlowitz would get calls from patients with leg, back and neck pain that would disappear by the time they came in to see him.

"If only I could have seen you then," they'd say.

So Kowlowitz, who more than 15 years ago founded the Center for Pain Management, decided to tailor medical services for individuals who needed immediate relief from acute muscular-skeletal pain.

This fall, he opened the Urgent Spine Care Center on the Northside, which offers same- or next-day appointments.

"I don't want to make somebody who has an acute, simple problem wait six weeks for a specialty appointment and put their lives on hold," Kowlowitz said.

"It's a lot more rewarding to see people and give them a quick cure and have them move on with their lives."

An encounter with a patient about a year and a half ago helped Kowlowitz make the decision to open the spine care mini-center.

Abigail Legg, ice skating coach for one of his employee's daughters, was pulling on her skating dress when her neck froze. With a critical competition just days away, Legg called Amy Rice, who would later become the spine center's administrator.



They've got your back: Physical therapist Dionne Jewell applies a cold compress to a patient during an electrical stimulation treatment session at the Urgent Spine Care Center on the Northside. The operation opened this fall. - Steve Sanchez / The Star

Legg got a fast appointment and was given an injection that eased her neck pain. The next day she was back on the ice, and that weekend she competed successfully.

Legg, now 23 and a pre-med student at Indiana University, has not had to go back for treatment. But she said that if the experience repeats itself, Kowlowitz's Center will be the first place she turns.

"I would absolutely be back in a heartbeat if I had reason to be," she said. "Knowing there's a place that I can go for something that can be handled immediately is invaluable."

The experience was invaluable from the Center's perspective, as well. Rice and Kowlowitz realized that Legg was not the only person to find herself in such a jam.

At the center, a same-day patient has access to a range of diagnostic and treatment tools, including on-site physical therapy and MRI.

"We start with a good, accurate diagnosis," Kowlowitz said. "As a whole, the sooner you get people into treatment, the stronger the chance that you will get better results."

Currently, about 10 percent of the patients he sees are urgent cases. Eventually, he hopes to increase that to 20 percent.

But other spine experts aren't sure most back patients need such services.

OrthoIndy has an urgent care clinic that takes walk-in patients with acute back, neck and shoulder injuries, said Dr. David Schwartz, an orthopedic spine surgeon.

Unless the person develops weakness or experiences other danger signs, most people with back pain can afford to wait the few weeks it takes to be seen.

"People can usually be treated symptomatically, and within seven days they're better, so we just try to make them comfortable for those seven days," he said. "It's not always the best thing to run out to a specialist."

Not only can a primary care physician handle this treatment, it's likely to be a more cost-effective way of handling the problem, Schwartz said.

But Kowlowitz argues that the Center could help save money by preventing over-utilization of health care in which a person returns again and again to the doctor, seeking relief before being referred to a specialist.

That attitude has earned the gratitude of Annie Rooney, who developed back pain and tried to see her physician but couldn't get an appointment for weeks.

Then she saw an ad for the center. Kowlowitz saw her and told her that if the pain did not subside, she would need an MRI. The procedure revealed that Rooney had a protruding disc with nerve impingement.

Next week, Rooney, a nurse, will go for an injection to help control the pain.

If not for the promise of same-day or next-day service, she would never have gone to Kowlowitz's Center, she said. But she's glad she did, because he ordered the MRI that diagnosed her condition.

"My doctor wouldn't have done that -- they kind of blew it off."

About the Urgent Spine Care Center

The Urgent Spine Care Center, a division of Indianapolis-based Center for Pain Management, offers Central Indiana adults with acute spine, back, leg or neck pain and injuries access to immediate care by a physician with special qualifications in interventional pain management. The Center specializes in back, neck, leg and spinal injuries and neuropathy pain such as pinched nerves, bulging discs, herniated disks, blocked nerves, muscle tears and pulls and sciatica problems that keeps adults from comfortably performing their daily home, work, family or leisure activities. The Center's four board-certified pain management physicians provide consultation, diagnosis and multidisciplinary treatment which may include physical therapy, imaging or interventional procedures such as steroid injections or nerve blocks. The Urgent Spine Care Center accepts most insurance plans and offers scheduled appointments between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. For more information visit www.UrgentSpineCareCenter.com.