

Relieving Atlas' Burden

The Ever-Shrinking World of Shoulder Arthroscopy

By Alexander Germanis

In Greek mythology, the Titan known as Atlas was punished by Zeus for insurrection; his punishment was to carry the heavens—or in some newer versions, the world—upon his shoulders. It is from this piece of legend, it could be fair to say, that the term “carrying the weight of the world on one’s shoulders” was derived.

So what happens when that weight is too much and the shoulders of Atlas begin to break down? Everyone experiences shoulder pain at some point, but for more serious problems like rotator cuff tendon tears and bicipital tendonitis, there are physicians like Dr. Joseph Norris, an orthopedic surgeon specializing in sports medicine at McLean County Orthopedics. Dr. Norris has set up a “one-stop shop for shoulder treatment.”

Perhaps the most interesting thing—and, for most patients, the most relieving thing—to hear is that “an awful lot of shoulder pain never requires surgery,” Dr. Norris assures.

Misdiagnosis is a common problem with patients suffering from shoulder pain—a common problem that can result in an uncommonly large medical bill. Dr. Norris finds that, quite often, a

patient will “actually have pain in their cervical spine” and that pain is being interpreted by the patient as shoulder pain, thus leading them to a shoulder specialist. “A misdiagnosis can lead to very expensive tests and treatments leading down the wrong path,” the doctor warns. For this reason “you have to get a detailed idea of the exact generators of that person’s pain,” he continues; therefore, the “physical exam and history are the cornerstones of trying to figure out the mystery of what’s going on in someone’s shoulder. The last piece of the puzzle is being able to treat anything that’s wrong.”

For those who definitely have shoulder issues, however, help can most certainly be attained. The most common shoulder problems are instability, also known as shoulder dislocation and multi-directional instability, rotator cuff tendon repairs, biceps tendon pathology, and labral tears—often a sports injury where a piece of gristle that surrounds the shoulder socket known as the labrum is injured. Fear of the doctor is common—so common it’s been given its own Latin name: iatrophobia—but for those with shoulder pain, that fear need not be justified. “Treatments start conservatively,” Dr. Norris assures. Should it come to surgery, the least amount of invasiveness is the goal. “I’m not opening up your shoulder, because I personally feel that treating things in the shoulder arthroscopically gives me better visualization and access to all structures and all pathologies of any shoulder,” he explains. “I can get in every crevice and every spot and every location within the shoulder.” At least where surgery is concerned, good things really do come in small packages.

One such small package is evidenced with rotator cuff tendon tears. The initial repair is performed arthroscopically, but the catalyst of the healing process is started on an equally small scale. The surgeon initiates microfractures of the shoulder, which in turn work by utilizing cells in the patient’s blood to aid in healing the tendon. Although the procedure is fairly new, it has proven to increase the healing rate of the rotator cuff significantly, getting the patient back into their normal lifestyle and back into the world that much sooner.

Figuratively, the world on Atlas’ shoulders may have been steadily shrinking for the last decade or so, but luckily, so have the invasive procedures necessary to mend the shoulders bearing the burdens of that world.

For more information about joint pain, cartilage restoration, arthroscopic surgery or other orthopedic questions, you may contact Dr. Norris at McLean County Orthopedics, 309-663-6461.

