



CENTRAL NEW YORK HEALTHCARE PROFILES

Rethinking Spine Care

Upstate Medical University's Primary Spine Practitioner, Denise Karsten, knows that surgery isn't necessary for every patient. In fact, as many as 95 percent of patients referred to surgeons with spine, back, and neck pain do not need surgery.

The surgeons at Upstate Brain and Spine Center knew something had to change. They were seeing more patients with spine-related disorders than ever before, but most didn't need a surgeon. What those patients did need was to see someone who also has a thorough understanding of spinal pain, the skill and experience to make accurate diagnoses, and who could offer non-surgical solutions as a first option. Those patients needed to see a Primary Spine Practitioner.

"Primary Spine Practitioners (PSPs) are healthcare specialists trained to provide primary care. They should be the 'first touch' for patients reporting any pain involving the spine, including the back and neck," says Denise Karsten. Karsten is a PSP working with the team at Upstate Brain and Spine Center to help patients find immediate and appropriate options for their spine issues so an episode of back or neck pain does not become a chronic or disabling problem. Karsten is a well-established Doctor of Chiropractic and Registered Nurse, and she holds a master's degree in cardiopulmonary trauma.

The Costs

The statistics are staggering. Direct costs associated with spine pain total more than \$100 billion annually. Indirect costs such as disability and lost productivity add another \$100 billion. Expenditures for imaging tests, opioid medications, epidural injections, and spinal surgeries



have increased several hundred percent over the last 25 years.

"But the increase in expense and time spent treating patients hasn't changed the outcomes for everyone," Karsten says. "Patients are still in pain and frustrated that they don't feel better."

Part of the problem is a lack of consistent treatment guidelines that has resulted, according to Karsten, "in a spine-care supermarket of more than 200 ways to treat pain, but very few people who can guide the choices."

The Solutions

One of the goals of the PSP protocol is to quickly get the patient to the right doctor at the right time to relieve pain. Karsten gets the word out about this approach to spine care by educating stakeholders anyway she can, including presenting information through regional Health Link education programs and health fairs and working one-on-one with physician assistants and primary care physicians. Her patients range from older patients suffering bone loss to middle-aged athletes to young patients dealing with the after effects of accidents.

When patients see Karsten, they have her undivided attention. Asking a lot of questions and listening to what patients have to say about their pain is key. She also performs neurological and orthopedic exams to determine the best course of action.

"My preference is to recommend nonsurgical options whenever appropriate," says Karsten. Among the options she prescribes are massage therapy, acupuncture, chiropractic manipulation, behavioral therapy, and physical therapy.

"My main goal is to motivate patients to care for themselves before their condition becomes chronic. Thanks to the vision and commitment of the Upstate team, I'm able to do just that."

UPSTATE
BRAIN AND SPINE CENTER

750 East Adams Street
Syracuse, NY 13210-2375
315-464-5540
www.upstate.edu