



SOLVING THE SOURCE OF PAIN

Backed by decades of experience and thousands of cases, the specialists at California Neurosurgical Institute won't give up on patients' pain.

The spine is an anatomical marvel, simultaneously bringing stability and flexibility to the human experience. But when its phenomenal functions are compromised, so is a patient's quality of life—sometimes to the point of complete incapacitation.

It's for this reason that California Neurosurgical Institute (CNI) exists—to solve the mysteries of a painful and underperforming spine. “We treat everything from trauma and tumors to herniated discs and spinal stenosis, as well as many complex revision procedures performed by other providers that didn't work out,” says Mark Liker, M.D., FAANS, FACS, founder and senior partner of CNI. “It's not uncommon for patients to say their doctors showed them X-rays to say everything looked good, but they still had pain. That's when they come to see us.”

With over 25 years in practice and approximately 500 procedures performed each year, Dr. Liker has seen it all. It's a perspective that lends depth and intuition to the treatment journey. “I always tell patients that I won't give up on them, that I'll keep working until I figure out where their pain is coming from and how we can fix it. And 99 out of 100 times, I will.”

Dr. Liker credits his untraditional route to medicine—first with an undergraduate degree in mechanical aerospace engineering, followed by a stint on Wall Street—for providing a unique lens for the neurosurgical world. “Having that background in 3D mechanical movement is very valuable in diagnosing and treating spine problems,” he says. “I can't imagine anything being more interesting, exciting, and impactful than neurosurgery.”

IN THE COMMUNITY

CNI is a community-based practice with convenient locations in Encino, Valencia, and Bakersfield. Rather than navigating the complex networks of large research facilities, patients have a direct line of communication to their CNI treatment team.

“It's also a significant stress reliever that patients don't have to travel multiple hours to see a personalized, high-quality subspecialist,” says neurosurgeon Bjorn Lobo, M.D., who specializes in the treatment of brain tumors that arise from the base of the skull and pituitary gland, brain aneurysms, hydrocephalus, Chiari malformations, and spinal disorders.

CNI providers relish the ability to cross paths with patients out in their community—at restaurants, at the grocery store, or at the gym. It provides a level of familiarity not often found in medical spheres, but one that is immensely beneficial to the patient experience. “When patients choose our practice because their friend or family member has already had a good experience here, it adds a level of reassurance to their own journey. I realize that any surgery involving the nervous system can be frightening, so adding a layer of comfort is helpful,” says Dr. Liker.

LEADING-EDGE OPTIONS

In some respects, the surgery is the easy part of solving a patient's pain. Often more challenging is the process of pinpointing the source of the problem. At CNI, deciphering an accurate diagnosis involves traditional tools such as MRI, CT, and X-ray—as well as an additional secret weapon: a single-photon emission computerized tomography (SPECT) scan.

“This technology was introduced about six years ago and allows us to see internal areas of inflammation,” says Dr. Liker. “It completely revolutionized the way I view a patient and determine their source of pain.”

Once the source is determined, CNI offers a deep toolbox of treatment options. The goal is to elect the path that is most effective and least invasive for each patient's anatomy. “A lot of surgeries these days involve screws, rods, and instrumentation, and sometimes that's necessary, but other times you can use minimally invasive techniques,” notes Dr. Liker. “Sometimes surgery isn't required at all, which is why a second opinion can be very helpful.”



PHOTOS BY BROOKE EDWARDS OF BROOKE RITTER PHOTOGRAPHY

Dr. Liker is one of the few physicians in California to employ the sophisticated Kambin's triangle technique to access delicate regions of the spine with minimal incision. The approach has been a game changer for patients who may not have been able to safely tolerate more traditional techniques, and as a minimally invasive option, it yields a shorter hospital stay and faster recovery.

“This revolutionary technique widens the field of patients who we can treat,” says Dr. Liker.

THE PERSONAL TOUCH

The technological evolution of medicine is sometimes a double-edged sword. While tools like electronic medical records (EMRs) are lauded for providing accurate and organized patient records, they can also, admittedly, distract from the personalization of medical care. “I don't like staring at a computer to take notes while I'm talking with patients,” says Dr. Liker. “Because I'm going to be in their body, it's important to have face-to-face contact with a patient.”

For this reason, Dr. Liker employs the assistance of a scribe to record his conversations with patients. That way, all pertinent information is still documented into safe, digital files, without compromising the intimacy of the physician-patient relationship.

“Patients are partners in the healing process, and it's important that we have a good relationship and clear interpersonal communication so that they understand the surgical process and recovery expectations,” says Dr. Liker. “If they understand the kinetics of the spine and what I'm trying to accomplish through the surgery, they'll do better in recovery.”

A specialized team of physician assistants is also pivotal to the success of the practice, adds Dr. Liker. Their attention to infrastructure minutiae allows the physicians to optimize their time with patients.

“We provide a friendly atmosphere in which the patient feels that they are taken care of and not just a cog in the medical machine,” concludes Dr. Lobo.



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