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Laser Spine Surgery: Promises Too Good to Be True

It's a new story but an old story too: For-profit spine surgery centers recruit patients with promises of relieving their long-standing back pain with tiny cuts and high-tech lasers. Then comes a string of malpractice lawsuits from patients crippled by the surgery. Then the journalists mount the evidence: Big profits, many operations, little scrutiny from state or federal health regulators, and no evidence the high-tech stuff even works.

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Bloomberg News just published this [expose of malpractice issues at the Laser Spine Institute](#), which has surgery centers in Philadelphia, Tampa, Scottsdale and Oklahoma City.

One problem for patients is that there's no FDA for surgeons. Unlike drug companies which have to show scientific evidence that their products work, surgeons can make promises to patients about minimally invasive surgery and show testimonials from satisfied customers that make it all sound irresistible, even with no real scientific proof that their high-tech stuff works any better than what other surgeons offer.

The laser part of the surgery merely substitutes the laser beam for what other surgeons would accomplish with an electrical current. In both cases, the idea is to burn off sensitive nerve endings between the vertebrae. The problem is that no matter what device does the burning, the pain relief tends to be short-lived as the nerve endings grow back.

The other part of the typical surgery at Laser Spine Institute involves removing some of the bones surrounding the spinal cord when those bones have become overgrown and the spinal canal is narrowed and painful. That is standard back surgery. It's different at the Laser Spine Institute only in the doctors operating through smaller holes and viewing the operative site through telescopes (endoscopes) rather than direct vision.

Since the surgery is done at a same-day surgery center, patients are sent home or to hotel rooms afterward, and that can be a huge issue if something goes awry. For example, it's not uncommon that patients start bleeding near the spinal cord after back

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surgery. This can create a collection of blood near the spine that compresses the nerves and can cause paralysis and damage to nerves controlling bowel and bladder function -- known as cauda equina syndrome.

The Bloomberg article also documents malpractice issues with other for-profit spine surgery outfits that compete with Laser Spine for patients. Those include the Bonati Institute in Hudson, Florida and North American Spine of Dallas.

Another big problem with the business model of these spine outfits, which are competing for an estimated \$73 billion that Americans spend annually seeking relief from back pain, is that surgeons are offered a "piece of the action" as investors in the profitability of the surgery center. That means that the more patients they send to surgery, and the bigger and more elaborate the operations they do, the more profit they make.

Sure enough, University of Michigan researchers found that **surgeons increased their recommendations for back surgery by 87 percent after they became part owners of surgery centers.** Their findings were published in the journal Health Affairs last year.

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