

## Is everything still in place?

### June 2006: An update on my condition four years after scoliosis surgery

On July 8th, I will celebrate my fourth anniversary with the screws and rod that were attached to my spine. From what I can tell, we're all still getting along and appear to remain fully committed to one another. I couldn't ask for more in a lifelong partner.

In the four years since my surgery with Dr. Pashman, many things have happened in my life (*most* of which is good). First, I left Los Angeles to study abroad for a year in Tokyo three months after surgery. Quite frankly, I was a bit fearful about having to hop on a plane so soon after having had major surgery. However, to my surprise, the brunt of my recovery was complete within a month of surgery and by mid-August of 2002, I was feeling great and confident that I could survive the 10 hour trans-Pacific flight and arrive in Tokyo in one piece.

As I expected, I made it over the Pacific and was able to spend a wonderful year in Tokyo. Although I cannot say that my Japanese skills made any significant strides, I was able to put my new spine to the test. I ran to class, rode crammed trains, jumped in ponds, made my way through inhumanely crowded streets while being thrashed by peoples' bags, all without incident.

While in Japan, as a routine checkup, I had a set of x-rays taken and had them looked over by Dr. Pashman. At that point, he noted that there were signs of bone fusion and although the fusion was not complete, I was on the right track. I felt relieved that I hadn't broken anything yet.

When having these x-rays taken, the attending Japanese physician asked me why I decided to have surgery and would choose to live my life as "damaged goods." He said that now, because of my scar, my prospects for marriage were significantly lower. This physician, being the one taking the x-rays, had cut and dry proof of exactly why I *needed* to have scoliosis surgery. My spine, even after surgery, remains quite crooked compared to the normal human spine, and the curvature was obvious on the x-rays.

I was appalled by this physician's remarks. I could not believe that a doctor would even suggest that it would be better to live life as an "undamaged good" than as a healthy person who no longer had to worry about one day having their lungs punctured by their ribs because of excessive curvature and twisting of the spine. It is my hope that doctors such as this one are a minute, minute minority and that scoliosis patients are not negatively influenced by such horrible comments.

At the time that I took my x-rays, approximately six months after surgery, my scar was indeed quite raw and still red and bumpy. I can understand why someone would be a bit taken aback by it. However, in all honesty, now that four years have passed, 90 percent of the scar has turned into a faint pink line, although a bit of redness remains at the top and bottom of the incision. I know that the scar will never disappear and that I will always live with a constant reminder of my surgery. But, frankly, I would *never* want to live a day without my scar. Rather than it being a source of embarrassment, for me, it is a source of pride. I am proud of having had the courage to pursue scoliosis surgery and to have continued pursuing my aspirations after having the surgery.

After studying abroad, I returned to Penn to finish my last year of college. Thankfully, I was able to complete my four years of undergrad without incident and upon graduation, chose to move back to Tokyo to study on a government scholarship. (Mom and Dad would clearly not have paid for this.)

I have now been living in Tokyo for two years and my health couldn't be better, aside from the (many) extra pounds I have gained. I have returned to Dr. Pashman to take routine x-rays on several occasions and according to him, my bones are continuing their fusing process. When I return to Los Angeles this coming October, I will be going in again for another set of x-rays to see how the fusing is progressing.

In the four years since surgery, I have encountered no major medical problems or setbacks, leaving me able to do everything that I wish to do, although I do still suffer from some minor aftereffects of surgery. Sometimes, my left leg, which is on the same side as my incision, goes numb and I have to force the blood to re-circulate by kindly hitting it. Presumably caused by this lack of blood flow is the dryness of the same leg. I mentioned to Dr. Pashman that I was suffering from these symptoms and he explained to me that they may be caused by a sympathectomy effect and that it is related to the fine nerves that control vein dilation. He reassured me that these aftereffects are both common and benign and that I should expect them to go away with time. Besides these little annoyances, both of which I have come to terms with, I have nothing to complain about in terms of my health and four years post-op, am very content with the outcome of my surgery.

Deciding whether or not to pursue scoliosis surgery is a difficult decision for anyone to make. One will indeed consider the short and long term consequences, will ponder all of the potential "what-ifs," and will surely come up with the most horrible outcomes possible. Fear will undoubtedly come to play a major role in the decision-making process.

However, it is my wish that hope and trust will overcome fear. As one who has had an extremely pleasant experience with scoliosis surgery and is fully enjoying life post-surgery, my hope is that others will find the courage to embrace their scoliosis and take the necessary measures to correct it. It is my belief that there is absolutely no need to let the fear take hold, especially when one has at their fingertips an amazing surgeon named Dr. Pashman. Four years ago, on a cold Monday morning, he changed my life and if given the opportunity, will change yours as well. All for the better.