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Physician Spotlight

Brett Gilbert, MD

By LUCY SCHULTZE

If Brett J. Gilbert, MD, wants to appreciate just how far hip- and knee-replacement surgery has come in recent decades, he need only look as far as the patients who come to him for revision procedures.

“It is interesting to see some of the old technologies and different mechanical pieces, which are really the foundation for what we do now,” said Gilbert, who specializes in adult joint reconstruction surgery with Triangle Orthopaedic Associates.

“For some of my patients who had joint replacements done as long as 30 years ago or more, there have certainly been a lot of improvements since that time,” he said. “Each step has been an incremental improvement in technology and operative techniques, and in terms of how we care for patients.”

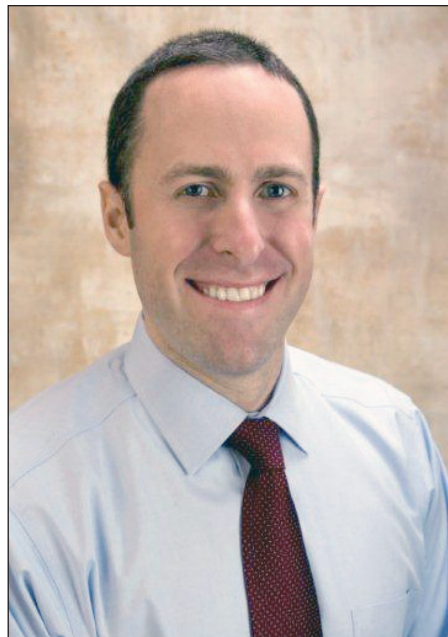
In Gilbert’s practice, the most recent such improvement has been the arrival of MAKOplasty®, a robotic-arm-assisted procedure for partial knee and total hip replacement. Triangle Orthopaedics has been offering the procedure for the knee since the technology debuted three years ago, and added hip procedures when that option became available last year.

Demand for MAKOplasty procedures has been increasing, Gilbert said.

“It’s one of those things where you start out slowly as you evaluate the technology and then the word gets out,” he said. “Most of the enthusiasm comes from the results the patients get in recovering more quickly.”

While in the past surgeons have relied upon the use of manual instruments and, later, computer navigation in the operating room, using a robotic arm in surgery offers a new level of accuracy and alignment of the replacement pieces.

The surgeon plans the procedure



in advance based on a CT scan or 3D model of the patient’s hip or knee. In the operating room, the robotic arm helps to implement the surgeon’s plan down to millimeter-level accuracy.

“I have to say it’s an exciting new technology,” said Gilbert, adding that returning quality of life to patients who have been suffering is truly rewarding.

“Hip and knee replacements are some of the best procedures we do in the history of modern medicine, in terms of getting rid of people’s pain and restoring function,” he said. “It’s great when we can find improvements to something that already works well.”

Like many orthopedic and sports-medicine practitioners, Gilbert was drawn to the field through his own experiences as a young athlete.

“I had the opportunity to interact with orthopedic surgeons as a patient,” he said. “I was able to see what interesting people they were, and also how they could have

such a dramatic effect on people’s lives in terms of getting them over injuries and ailments.”

A native of Chicago, Gilbert graduated from the University of Illinois and earned a medical degree from Duke University School of Medicine. He completed his orthopedic surgery residency at Duke University Medical Center, then returned to Chicago for an Adult Joint Reconstruction Fellowship at Rush University Medical Center.

He is certified by the American Board of Orthopaedic Surgery, and practices at Rex Hospital and North Carolina Specialty Hospital.

Gilbert’s practice focuses primarily on patients with hip and knee arthritis, providing advanced joint-replacement options for patients who have experienced years of wear and tear in their joints.

Some patients have arthritis that is localized to just one portion of their knee. For these individuals, a partial-knee replacement can potentially offer a more rapid recovery.

“Those patients tend to say afterward that the knee feels more natural to them, and their range of motion can be better as well,” Gilbert said.

Patients who undergo hip-replacement surgery typically experience a rapid recovery that can be quicker and easier than many other procedures, he said. “It really makes a huge difference in the patient’s quality of life.”

Another focus of Gilbert’s practice has been revision joint replacement, for those patients who outlive the effectiveness of an original procedure. Going back in to redo or fix a joint replacement from years ago gives him an appreciation for how much better his patients’ options are today.

“At the start of joint replacements, they had very few different sizes,” he said.

“You had to just pick what was closest to what the patient had, but it wasn’t necessarily a perfect anatomic match. Today we get down to making sure we recreate a right knee versus a left knee, and to the exact size and shape.”

Since problems in a joint replacement can often be seen in an X-ray before the patient feels something’s wrong, it’s important for people who have had joint replacements to continue with regular follow-ups and monitoring — even if they’re feeling fine, Gilbert said.

Whether he’s performing an original or revision procedure, he enjoys witnessing the difference it makes in patients’ lives.

“The most rewarding part of what I do is that you can see a patient who’s having a problem, you can identify what’s going on, and often you can offer a solution to fix the problem,” he said.

“That’s a unique thing in medicine. A lot of times, we’re trying to manage chronic problems. But in orthopedics, we have the opportunity to try to fix problems and get our patients back on the golf course, playing tennis or playing with their grandkids.”

Having practiced as part of Triangle Orthopaedic Associates since 2008, Gilbert was glad for the opportunity to settle down in Raleigh.

“There are terrific people from all over the country who have settled down here,” he said. “The Triangle area provides a fantastic quality of life for raising a family.”

Most of Gilbert’s time outside of work is focused on spending time with his family. He and his wife, Laura, are the parents of Ashley, 5, and Sarah, 3.

“They are certainly the loves of our lives,” he said. “They are high-spirited and high-energy, and we enjoy riding bikes, going swimming, or going on a hike together.”