

The Braemar Way



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Dear Colleague

Braemar Hospital orthopaedic spine surgeon Joe Baker has many reasons for celebrating golfing legend Tiger Woods' comeback...

LIKE MILLIONS OF OTHER WEEKEND GOLFERS, JOE BAKER HAS FOLLOWED TIGER WOODS' INCANDESCENT CAREER WITH AWE. BUT HIS INTEREST IN THE 14-TIME MAJOR WINNER'S COMEBACK, AFTER A FIVE-YEAR TITLE DROUGHT, GOES BEYOND THE GOLFER'S MASTERY.



It has more to do with the spine surgery that made the comeback possible.

Woods has had four operations on his spine to remedy sciatica. Last year, surgeons at Texas Back Institute fused his L5 and S1 vertebrae. Less than a year after the fusion, Woods strode out to the first tee at Atlanta, where he won his 80th PGA tour title. Joe Baker, an orthopaedic spine surgeon, who has joined Braemar Hospital, says the golfer is a great advertisement for the success of spine surgery. "To think you can get back to that high level of function is fantastic."

Joe is a New Zealander but, after graduating from Otago University, he spent a decade in Ireland, where he met his wife, Deirdre, a plastic surgeon. While

there, he worked alongside a team of "inspirational" surgeons at the National Spinal Injuries Unit in Dublin, to treat complex spine conditions, including major trauma, degenerative conditions, tumours and deformities.

Spine surgery appealed to him because of the range of conditions and the variety of patients. "You are dealing with all pathologies from those in the elderly to the very young."

He says the spine is complex, and each area – from the neck to the pelvis – presents different challenges. "But when you spend a lot of time studying it, it becomes clearer. Most of the time the history will direct you, then scans and investigations will simply confirm that,

but occasionally guide you differently."

He enjoys unravelling the problems and enabling people to get back to their lives. "It's very satisfying to visit a patient after surgery and hear that the pain has gone."

He says the advancements in spinal surgery, especially using minimally invasive techniques, are dramatic. "Over time, we have found less invasive ways of doing things. Smaller incisions, less morbidity, quicker recovery."

Other new technologies are coming through, offering options to a wide variety of patients, "It's a matter of watching and waiting to see the early evidence to support their ongoing use. They are exciting because they allow us to do things we couldn't do before.

Patients who may not be up for the really big procedures are perhaps able to access some of these."

He says when surgeons approach the spine, they are trying to restore function, while accepting the limitations of what can and can't be achieved. "You need to assess the patient and the technology available. You need to consider what the patient wants to achieve after surgery and tailor treatment accordingly."

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He says it is important that patients are realistic about outcomes. "It's important to discuss with patients what is wrong, the natural history of their condition and the options available, so they have a good understanding." Pain is the most common complaint. "If you can get rid of nerve pain, patients are generally very happy."

While the health of backs hasn't changed much over time, he says, inactivity and obesity are contributing to back

problems. "Lifestyle modifications and a non-operative approach are always the first options, so keeping active and trying to find the right exercise is still the first recommendation for anyone."

A recent Dunedin population study showed the current generation of children were 25 per cent heavier and less fit than their parents at the same age. "That contributes to a whole host of problems including lower back problems."

At Braemar, his work will be similar to what he does at Waikato DHB, offering spinal surgical services to adults and younger patients down to adolescents. While his particular interest is in deformity, he also operates on degenerative and post-traumatic conditions. He also has an academic position with the University of Auckland and is passionate about his ongoing research. He travels regularly to conferences and to keep in touch with colleagues.

He says New Zealand offers highly contemporary care in spine surgery. "In terms of managing spine conditions, New Zealand offers care at a standard as high as anywhere else I have worked."

Outside work, he spends time with Deirdre and their three daughters aged 8, 6 and three. Plus, of course, the occasional round of golf.

JOE BAKER

QUALIFICATIONS

- BA
- MBChB
- MCh
- FRCSI

ROOMS AT

Sport and Spine
20 Hammond Street
Hamilton
P. (07) 834 9159
E. info@sportandspine.co.nz

AREAS OF SPECIALISATION

Spine Surgery

SPECIALIST TRAINING

Fellowships at New York
University Hospital for Joint
Diseases and Auckland City
Hospital

POSITIONS & MEMBERSHIPS

Consultant Orthopaedic Surgeon,
Waikato Hospital
Associate Professor in Surgery,
University of Auckland
Member of AO Spine, Eurospine

CURRENTLY WORKING AT BRAEMAR HOSPITAL

Yes



braemarhospital.co.nz

24 Ohaupo Road, Hamilton | PO Box 972, Waikato Mail Centre 3240
Phone: 07 843 1899 | Fax: 07 834 3944

