

LOCAL MAN HAS HEART SURGERY WITH LITTLE TO SHOW FOR IT

TUPELO, Miss.—James Howell of Tupelo has a repaired heart valve but very little to show for it.

Sixty-year-old Howell, a retired plumbing contractor, became the first patient to undergo minimally invasive mitral valve repair at North Mississippi Medical Center on Oct. 3. While the procedure has been done at major medical centers nationwide, it was not available in this region until now.

“I had always been active, climbing in and out of houses for 40 years as a plumbing contractor,” Howell said. “But I got to where I would just completely give out when I’d do just a little bit of exertion. Then I got to where I couldn’t even walk across the room without giving out.”

A cardiologist referred him to David Talton, M.D., a cardiothoracic surgeon on staff at NMMC. “My heart valve wasn’t opening correctly, which was sending some of the blood to the wrong place, and it was making my heart get larger,” Howell said. “My blood wasn’t getting enough oxygen.”

Several diagnostic tests, including cardiac catheterization, indicated that Howell was a prime candidate for the minimally invasive procedure. “Dr. Talton explained that he would make a small incision for the instruments and use a TV monitor to do the surgery,” Howell said. This technology left Howell with a 10-centimeter scar under his right breast and spared him the customary long incision.

“The incision for a minimally invasive procedure is about one-third as long as traditional open heart surgery,” Dr. Talton explained. “Many people are familiar with robotic surgery, which was developed about the same time, but actually the procedure we do requires an even smaller incision than robotic surgery. It’s even less invasive.”

Dr. Talton has performed several minimally invasive aortic valve repairs at NMMC after training last year at Massachusetts General Hospital, which is affiliated with Harvard Medical School. He later trained at New York University to do mitral valve repair and replacement, a procedure which requires different equipment.

While the minimally invasive procedure produces similar results with less blood loss and a somewhat shorter recovery, it actually takes longer than traditional valve repair or replacement. “I’m using the same techniques I’ve always used but with very small instruments,” Dr. Talton said. “The instruments are long because without the big incision

to work through, we have to go through more of the chest wall to get where we need to go.”

The decision to invest in new equipment and offer this option was definitely patient-driven. “The results are the same, but doing it this way is much more cosmetically pleasing because the patient doesn’t have a scar running the length of his or her chest,” Dr. Talton said. “Patients have asked for this. We want to be able to offer them anything here that they can get at a larger medical center.”

While this is Howell’s first heart surgery so he has nothing to compare it to, he is definitely pleased with the results. “I have had virtually no pain from the incision,” Howell said. “I spent one day in the Critical Care Unit and they had me up and walking by the third day in the hospital.”

Howell says Dr. Talton warned him his condition might have been irreversible in another year to 18 months, which makes him even happier he went ahead and had the problem checked out. Now he’s out and about much better than even before surgery. “Every day it gets just a little bit better,” he said. “Every day I can do just a little bit more than the day before.”

For more information about services available through NMMC’s Heart Institute, call 1-800-THE DESK (1-800-843-3375).