

Fitness alone no guarantee of spinal strength

By DR. CHRISTOPHER CIANCI

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At Cross Courts, an Easton tennis club, advance drills start at 8:30 a.m. Players are matched into doubles to be “drilled” by the club professional on strategy, strokes and other fine points of the game of tennis. It was about an hour into one of those 1 ½ hour drills that Kimberly Baker, 52, felt a very severe muscle spasm in her lower back. It was not an unfamiliar discomfort.

Previously, she had suffered from the pain of a ruptured disc, which began acting up about 15 years ago. Finally, eight years ago, she chose surgery. “It was very successful,” she said. “I was pain free.” She celebrated that, emotionally. She reveled in it. She had been under chiropractic care on the Western Shore for the years before surgery. Now, she seemed to say, I don’t need to worry about that. The pain is gone. I will get on with my life. No more doctors. Hooray.

That was a mistake.

A little background here. Kimberly and her husband, Glenn, the parents of two grown children, had had a cottage on the Eastern Shore for weekends and summers while their kids were growing up and had looked forward to the time when the offspring were out of college, on their own. The Bakers moved here permanently three years ago.

The couple had met while they were both working at AT & T and were married 20 years ago. Glenn is retired but Kimberly, now a 30-year veteran of the high tech communications industry, is a much traveled – - across the country and the world – - vice president for government markets at Boston-based Veracode, which specializes in cyber-security software for the government and private industry.

Through all of this, Kimberly, a gymnast as a youth, stays fit and active. Thus, a regimen that includes tennis at Cross Courts. Reflecting on that Saturday morning at Cross Courts a year ago, Kimberly thinks she may have slipped a bit on the court’s surface. The back pain had returned. She attempted to play on. “Then there was a total seize-up,” she said. The rest of the weekend was spent “on ice and Advil” and on Monday morning, she told husband Glenn she had to see a chiropractor.

“Oh,” he said, “call Chris Cianci. We play golf together.” Within an hour, she was in the office of Dr. Christopher Cianci, Easton chiropractor, and within six weeks, she said, “I was back playing tennis.”

There is a wellness lesson to be learned here, according to Dr. Cianci. “Kimberly is a great example of how, when it comes to your spine, fitness alone can’t prevent spinal weaknesses from showing up,” he said. “She’s in phenomenal shape,” he said, “She’s a lifelong athlete, yet if you don’t have a regimen that includes regular spinal attention, you are setting yourself up for problems.”

Exercise does not affect spinal alignment and exercising on a misaligned spine can increase wear and tear, Dr. Cianci continued. “Look at this way,” he explained. “Suppose the front end of your car is out of alignment and you choose to drive it harder and faster. You and your car are

asking for trouble. “That’s like exercising with a spinal misalignment... you and your spine are asking for trouble.”

Over the course of any given day, Dr. Cianci says he will see six, maybe 10 patients who already have had spinal surgery. “These are folks, like Kimberly, who figured, after the surgery, that their problems were over. It seldom happens that way.” Too often, Dr. Cianci says, patients who have had surgery think that chiropractic is not for them.

“What they need to realize,” he continued, “is that often surgery involves only one segment of the spine that has been worn out. That leaves 23 other segments which most likely need attention if they are not also to wear out prematurely.” That is why, he said, patients who have had surgery on one level of the spine, years later go back for a second round of surgery because the spine has developed a problem at another level.

The advent of technology such as cold laser and spinal decompression has opened up a huge array of options, not available a few years ago, for spinal care, either pre- or post-surgically, Dr. Cianci said. The Easton chiropractor has done post-graduate course work in post-surgical syndrome and has experience, he said, “with hundreds of failed back surgeries.” It is that experience he brought to the case of Kimberly Baker who might have been headed, he said, “to life full of limitations.” Bottom line, Dr. Cianci says: Spinal health is a long-term commitment on the road to wellness. Surgery, if it is advised, is just a repair shop along the way.

Looking back on those eight years following her surgery, Kimberly realizes that she erred in not returning, post-surgically, to chiropractic care. “I was so happy to be out of pain,” she said. “The surgery had been very successful.” And after the normal recovery period, she had picked up her life again. In that bliss, continued attention to her back problems was off the mind track.

But she learned her lesson. She is now on a wellness program, which includes regular visits to the Cianci Chiropractic Center for spinal adjustments. “I won’t make that mistake again,” she said, happily.