

I was at the “Fall for Chatsworth” festival this past weekend and I ran into one of my former patients. Like some of my patients, she is one who typically only shows up when she is in significant pain and receives treatment only until the severe pain is gone. She doesn’t continue treatment long enough to correct or improve the underlying cause of her pain.

She was relating to me her most recent problems that she has had with her back. She had an appointment with her medical doctor for a routine physical. She told him about her pain and he ordered an MRI. The results from the MRI didn’t provide any new information of significance. She had multiple levels of disc degeneration with bone spurring. She had evidence of multiple pinched nerves. All of this had been developing for many years as it takes a long time for the spine to deteriorate to that degree.

Her doctor told her that surgery probably wouldn’t provide much benefit which is probably true. I told her that according to the research that I have read, surgery is most beneficial when there is a significant disc problem at one level and the rest of the spine is relatively healthy. Surgery is also rarely indicated until six to eight weeks of conservative care, such as chiropractic, has been performed without success. Most disc injuries will show improvement in this time frame with this type of care. When there are disc herniations at multiple levels as well as widespread spinal degeneration, surgery tends to be much less successful and there is a greater risk of a negative outcome.

My former patient asked me if there was any help for her condition, since she has so much degeneration that was probably irreversible. I asked her how long she had been experiencing this episode of pain. She said about 8 weeks. I asked her if the pain was constant during that 8 weeks and she said it had been. This meant that prior to 8 weeks ago she had days where she had little or no pain.

I told her that if an MRI had been done 9 weeks ago, it would not likely have been any different from the MRI that she had after her pain started. A very small change in her spine caused her to go from being relatively pain free to having constant pain. It would be ideal if we could completely correct her spine, but that is not possible in cases like hers. Fortunately a significant improvement in pain can result from a small improvement in the function of the spine. For example, even slightly improving the alignment of her spine, could allow her to be pain free again.

Many people have spinal disc degeneration and even herniated discs without having any pain. If she returns to my office for care once again, hopefully she will continue her care beyond the point where the pain is reduced, so we have an opportunity to improve the function of her spine as much as possible. This will help prevent future episodes of pain and help protect the spine from accumulating further damage that may not be able to be corrected.