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Device used as an alternative to fusion surgery

By [Debra Pressey](#)

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URBANA – For Tamara Filer, a bank employee in Vandalia, the pain started last July after she used a big paper cutter at work.

Her left shoulder and arm hurt like never before, she said.

After several visits to a chiropractor, she felt the pain subsiding – but then it was back again suddenly, with a vengeance.

Today, she's pain-free, thanks to a new procedure she underwent at the Carle Spine Institute in Urbana.

Even the day after she had the surgery, she said, "I could tell a huge difference already."

Under the procedure performed by Dr. Robert Hurford, a Carle spine surgeon, an artificial disc was placed in her neck area to relieve the pain.

Cervical disc replacement surgery has been done outside the U.S. for about a decade, Hurford said. But it's a brand-new option in this country, available only after the FDA approved the first artificial disc for use in the neck area last summer.

The company that makes the disc, Medtronic, said it could bring relief to thousands of people suffering from degenerative disc disease that can cause severe pain and loss of mobility in the neck and arm.

In a cervical disc replacement surgery, a damaged disc is removed and replaced with an artificial one – a stainless steel device with a ball-in-trough design intended to help replicate normal neck movement.

Cervical disc replacement surgery is an alternative to the traditional spinal fusion surgery, which involves removing a damaged disc, then fusing the vertebrae together.

Spinal fusion has been a successful treatment, Hurford said, and it may still be the best option for some patients.

The new procedure, however, allows patients to remain more normal neck movement and may help them avoid the need for additional surgery later, he said. Plus, patients can generally return to work a bit faster following this surgery than they can following spinal fusion.

Hurford said Filer was suffering from a cervical radiculopathy, which involves a pinched nerve in the neck related to a herniated disc.

Filer, 42, said her chiropractor sent her for an MRI when her pain started returning after eight treatments, and she



Heather Coit

Physician Robert Hurford gives patient Tamara Filer of Vandalia a lesson about the spine Tuesday at the Carle Spine Institute in Champaign. Filer was attending a post-surgery appointment.

was eventually directed to Carle for treatment.

She ruled out two of the options Hurford gave her: doing nothing or trying pain injections that would bring temporary relief, she said.

By that time, the pain had gotten so bad, she added, that she couldn't turn her head and was trying to relieve the pain by lying in the bathtub with a towel under her neck. And she couldn't sleep, her husband, Marlin, said.

She chose the third option – surgery.

At a follow-up visit to Carle this past week, Filer said she'd recommend the procedure to others.

Not only is her pain gone, she said, but she was also up walking the day after the surgery and back to work in four weeks.

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