

They're Not Always Right

By: Rozaini Othman

I'm 39 years old, I enjoy exercise and am very active. My free time is often spent in various forms of exercise. I've played tennis for nearly twenty years and hope to be active till the day I keel over.

I've been extremely fortunate over the years to have never had a major injury. I've had the usual pulls and strains and roughly five years ago, I injured my knee. I went to the doctor, he diagnosed a small tear, prescribed some exercises and I was soon fine.

This time was different though. I hurt my knee playing tennis and the pain didn't go away with the usual at-home remedies. Ice, exercise and stretching had always done the trick in the past, but not now. The pain remained and in fact, had shifted from the front, to the back of my knee.

I went to a doctor who came highly recommended. He took X-rays that were inconclusive and he then sent me for an MRI. For those of you who don't know what an MRI is, the best way I can describe it is as a much more detailed picture of what's going on. You're put in a chamber for anywhere from 20-45 minutes and the machine takes pictures of your knee from every conceivable angle. Your MRI results usually provide the definitive word on your condition. I had my MRI on an afternoon at 5:00 and was told to call my doctor for the results the next afternoon.

The next day rolled around and I called the doctor. He came on the phone with a very definite diagnosis; "You have a tear in your medial meniscus and a Baker's cyst behind the knee. That's what's causing your pain in the back of the knee." The treatment? "Arthroscopic surgery," was the reply.

"It's no big deal," said the doctor. "The procedure takes about 25 minutes, I'll go in, repair the tear, clean it out, you'll be on your feet the next day and back to full strength in six weeks, no big deal."

He gave me the number to call to schedule the surgery and reminded me as we hung up once again, "it's no big deal." No big deal to him perhaps, but to me it came as quite a jolt. A thousand thoughts were rushing through my mind. "When should I have the surgery? How long will I be out? Will my knee ever be 100% again?"

When I got home that night my wife and I were trying to figure out the best time for me to have the surgery. We asked and answered many questions over the weekend and formulated a game plan. We were ready to schedule the surgery but then we realised we had forgotten to ask one very important question: Do I really need the surgery? Might there be another alternative?

Like many of us, I had always believed that doctors had all the answers and their advice was always the final, correct path to take. Plus, I was 39 year-old and had been very active for most of my life. Maybe the parts were beginning to wear down a bit. Still, I started to ask a lot of "what if questions." What if I didn't have surgery? Might the pain go away? What if I tried therapy instead of surgery? Might the pain go away? I put together a list of questions and called my doctor a few days later.

We finally connected around 8:00 p.m. and I went through my list. The surgery was a "no big deal" response surfaced many times and the doctor was somewhat indignant that I would dare to question his authority.

Toward the end of the conversation, I had gotten the doctor to concede that therapy might be an option all though, as he put it, "I doubt that you would do anything in therapy that you're not already doing on the court now." Regardless, his attitude angered me enough to pursue the "what ifs" by doing some research.

I took to the Internet and learned as much as I could about my tear and cyst. I learned that both are quite common and that there are other, more conservative forms of treatment. I then decided to track down my doctor from five years ago. I packed up my x-rays, MRI and the doctor's reports and took them to him for a second opinion.

His response was quite different from the first. "You absolutely do NOT need surgery," the doctor said. He went on to explain that my tear was the same one that I had suffered from five years ago. I learned that it is the type of tear that will not heal itself but does not require surgery unless it "breaks

through the meniscus wall" which it hadn't. My cyst had seemingly dissolved itself as they often do, and the pain I was feeling was that process. He gave me a few exercises to do, a few to stay away from and I left his office smiling.

So now I had two opinions, one obviously much preferable than the other. But anyway, I needed a tie-breaking opinion. I decided to see one more doctor and boy, did that become an ordeal. I began to ask around and of course, everyone has a doctor who is "the best."

I finally settled on a doctor from Sungai Petani. The fellow who does our medical insurance recommended him and I felt confident in his opinion because, as an insurance agent, he knows them all. He knows who likes to cut, who cuts well and who is more conservative.

I made an appointment and went through my tale. He asked a lot of questions, looked at my tests, manipulated my knee, smiled and said, "So I'm the tiebreaker I guess." I liked him immediately. Anyway, his diagnosis was much like my old doctor's -- no surgery, exercises and lots of stretching. Majority wins, and it looks as if the second two doctors were right. My knee feels great, and I have resumed my active lifestyle.

The purpose of this column is not to knock one doctor and praise others. It is to tell you to always explore other options before you commit to any medical course of action. Those of us who are involved in tennis will invariably suffer injuries, particularly as we get older. Sometimes a doctor will prescribe surgery and it may well be the correct course of action. Other times it is not.

I'm not saying that my first doctor was a bad doctor, only that he presented his opinion as to what the best treatment for my knee was. His opinion, while educated, was not the only opinion and thank God, I went for others. I get a chill down my spine when I think about the surgery I almost had that I clearly did not need at this point in my life. I may need it down the road but certainly not now.

There are so many doctors out there, each has his or her level of skill and approach to conditions. If you are faced with a medical condition, research your injury, get a second opinion and maybe a third.

Remember, a doctor should treat patients, not conditions. Your doctor should be someone who understands your lifestyle, your personality and who you have a rapport with. They should explain your situation, your options and encourage you to seek a second opinion. They should not dictate or condescend.

If, in any way, you feel uncomfortable with your doctor or their diagnosis, don't make the mistake I nearly did----GET ANOTHER OPINION!!!!