Robotic-assisted vasectomy reversal offers greater chance of fatherhood

27 May 2010

In 1989 a 29-year-old Michael Schrader had it all: steady job, a wife, and two wonderful children—daughter Courtney and son Cameron. He couldn't envision wanting more—that is, more children. Taking steps to keep his nuclear family intact, he underwent vasectomy— a procedure so routine he was back on the golf course the next afternoon.

Divorce later frayed this family portrait, but in the years that followed Schrader would ultimately revisit the issue of having children with his soon to be second wife Liz. The couple turned to urological experts at Northwestern Memorial Hospital for counsel on Schrader's vasectomy reversal. That was nearly 10 years ago. This past April, Northwestern Memorial became the first center in the Midwest to perform a pioneering robotic assisted vasectomy reversal using the da Vinci surgical robot. Experts believe this approach is superior to traditional surgery in that it may yield more successful outcomes and reduce couples' wait times for conceiving naturally.

"Many people think getting a vasectomy reversed is just like turning on a faucet that was off," said William Lin, MD, a Northwestern urological surgeon specializing in microsurgery. "But it's not that simple. Reversal is a very delicate procedure that requires ultra precision for it to be successful."

Lin explains this high degree of precision is ideally achieved by using the robot, and it's the primary reason for evaluation of robotic applications for vasectomy reversal. Although the method doesn't cut procedural or recovery times, surgical researchers like Lin are interested in its potential to offer men an earlier return and higher concentration of sperm, which according to him "theoretically increases the likelihood of natural pregnancy."

Schrader says during the initial years after his divorce, he harbored no regrets about his vasectomy. "I didn't think I would get remarried, and I didn't think I would have more children. But then I met Liz."

The robot wasn't being used at the time, but Schrader was Lin's first vasectomy reversal at the start of his tenure at Northwestern back in 2001. Schrader recalls being surprised by how involved the reversal was compared to his vasectomy.

"I could barely walk when I left the hospital after the vasectomy reversal, and had to be helped out to the car by my wife," said Mike. "It must have been a good two months before I felt normal again."

Lin said that while a vasectomy is a ten minute, outpatient procedure, the reversal can take between four-five hours and recovery time could take up to ten days.

"It's not good enough to be pretty sure you want to have a vasectomy," said Lin. "You have to really consider the time and financial implications of vasectomy reversal because there's always a chance it won't be successful."

Success did happen for the Schrader clan, and Liz and Mike welcomed twins Kendall and Casey in January 2002, less than two years after Lin reversed Mike's vasectomy.

"We were lucky," said Mike. "They didn't offer the surgery with the robot back then, but if it had been available, that's the route we would have gone. Reversing the vasectomy was a very involved procedure, so we would have been in favor of having the reversal with the robot--anything that would have increased the chance that we'd make our dream of having more children come true."

Provided by Northwestern Memorial Hospital