

Healing The Lumberjack

A 70-year-old man. An unwanted lemon tree. An axe. If this sounds like a recipe for trouble, it was.

William Hoey of Scottsdale was hale and hearty at 70 years of age, but a few days after he took on the lemon tree with his axe, he was in serious pain.

"We thought he just sprained his back," said his daughter Elizabeth, a CPA who lives near Albuquerque, but spent weeks in the Valley in 2006 caring for her father and her worried mother.

William Hoey went to see his doctor who sent him to a famous medical center. "They said I had osteoporosis, something nobody had mentioned to me before. And they said I had cracked a vertebrae. They put in a balloon to push the vertebrae up to where it was supposed to be."

And when that didn't help, they did it again with two other vertebrae. "They said, 'How are you doing?' and I said, 'This thing is killing me.' They said, 'You'll be OK' and gave me some pills. So I got dressed and got into a wheelchair and went home."

Six days later, still in severe pain and unable to stand up straight he saw another doctor. "He took one look at me and said, 'You have to go to Barrow right away. They're the only people who can help you,'" Hoey recalled.

That's when he met Dr. Randall Porter. The balloon shots had somehow given him an infection similar to the acne that inflicts teenagers. Only in Hoey's case, it was eating away at his 5th, 6th, and 7th vertebrae, in the upper region of his spine.

Hoey spent a few months in rehab waiting for the infection to clear up. Then Dr. Porter went to work. It took his surgical team two days of eight-hour surgeries, but he got Hoey's back repaired.

One thing Hoey and his daughter remember about the ordeal in September, 2006: The night before the first surgery Dr. Porter came in and prayed with them.

"We all held hands and prayed," Hoey said. "I thought, 'My god, this guy is really good.' And he also takes his time in talking to you and answers any questions. He makes you feel important," said Hoey.

"He's a nice, normal guy," Elizabeth said. "If you talked to him, you would never know he was a surgeon. But without him, my father would probably be dead." And as for her father: "I'm walking with a cane, but I'm on the mend." Any more lumberjack work? "I've learned my lesson," Hoey said.