

Inside the Operating Room

Assistant Editor Brenda Welch shares her experience of being a “fly on the wall” during a milestone procedure for Hampton Roads.

WRITTEN BY BRENDA WELCH

On Oct. 2, I called my closest friends and said, “I’ll be in surgery all morning, so if there is an emergency, page me.”

I am not a surgeon, nor do I have a pager. I do have fantastic friends who put up with my not so subtle, or particularly funny, attempts at humor. And technically, I was in surgery—groundbreaking surgery—but merely as an onlooker.

When I got the invitation to watch Dr. Robert Knowles, a general surgeon and active member of Bon Secours DePaul Medical Center’s surgical staff in Norfolk, remove a woman’s gallbladder through her belly button—or, in “medical speak,” perform a single-incision laparoscopic cholecystectomy—I immediately accepted.

Growing up in a household with a mother who read *The Merck Manual* while her PTA peers soaked up Danielle Steele’s latest novel, I was always fascinated by the field of medicine. The fact that the surgery I was invited to watch was to be only the second of its kind in Hampton Roads had me practically scrubbing in before I actually left the house.

The morning of the surgery, I arrived at Bon Secours DePaul Medical Center in Norfolk and literally ran from my car to the Ambulatory Care Center, mostly because I was excited, but partly because I was late. The health system’s communications director met me at the elevator and got me outfitted in bona fide scrubs, including a cap, mask and booties. She led me into the operating room, where I watched in awe for the next two hours.

One day earlier, Knowles had performed the area’s first SILS procedure, or single-incision laparoscopic surgery; the day I observed, he did it again.



Surgeons perform laparoscopic surgery, also referred to as minimally invasive surgery, with the aid of a camera attached to flexible instrumentation and several thin instruments used to cut and suture. The surgeon makes small incisions up to half an inch long into which plastic tubes called ports are inserted. The surgeon then feeds the camera and flexible instruments into the patient’s body through the ports. Because the surgeon can’t see directly into the patient without a large incision, the camera serves as his or her eyes.

SILS is a revolutionary technique in which laparoscopic surgery is performed through a single small incision hidden within the navel. Working through this small incision, a surgeon can perform standard laparoscopic operations such as gallbladder removal, which, when done with traditional surgical methods, involves four to six incision sites.

“Although this procedure is technically challenging because of the learning curve for the instrumentation and the [loss] of tactile feedback [or perceptible sense of touch], the

benefits to the patient’s recovery are significant,” said Knowles after both procedures. “Both surgeries went well, and the patients are recovering quickly with minimum discomfort around the surgical site.”

Minimally invasive surgical procedures, such as SILS, offer patients smaller (or in the case of SILS, fewer) incisions; reduced pain, scarring and likelihood of complications (such as infections); and a faster recovery as compared to traditional or “open” procedures.

According to Knowles, eventually, similar procedures will become the standard for general, urologic, gynecologic, and bariatric (weight loss) surgery applications.

My morning in surgery came to a close much too quickly, and I reluctantly placed my scrubs into the hospital bin and returned home. Although I was merely a fly on the wall in the operating room, I am proud that I was privy to a major medical achievement for Hampton Roads—a procedure that will greatly benefit members of the community for years to come. ■

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