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THE MORNING READ

Connected like hips and thighs

Father and son,
both orthopedic
surgeons, bond
over broken bone.

By **GREG HARDESTY**
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

ORANGE • Dr. Steven Barnett cracks into the right femur of a 52-year-old woman.

His father, facing him from the other side of the patient and using a suction device to keep the area around the bone clean, cracks a joke:

"The guy with the most tools wins," Dr. Lawrence Barnett says.

The two surgeons' heads are completely covered in light-blue hoods with ventilators; infections can really get nasty when metal parts are touching human parts. The

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FATHER:
Orthopedic
surgeon
Lawrence
Barnett, 69,
is consid-
ering
retirement -
reluctantly.



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SURGERY

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woman's metal stem broke in two places after eight years.

Sometimes, it happens.

The procedure at St. Joseph Hospital technically is known as a hip "revision" - a term that doesn't even begin to hint at the indelicate surgical work involved.

Saws, mallets, clamps - there are enough tools laid out around the patient to fill a shelf at a Home Depot.

When he was in junior high school, Steve Barnett used to sit in on some of his father's surgeries. The craftsmanship involved in being a "bone doctor" fascinated him.

Now, often, Larry Barnett - a 35-year veteran at St. Joe's, who hates the idea of retirement but is considering it - can be found assisting his son, who at age 39 is considered one of Orange County's top practitioners in the highly specialized field of knee and hip surgeries.

The father-and-son team at the Orange-based hospital often discuss, during surgeries, stuff like who will be bringing the potato salad and sodas to the next family get-together.

Both Steve and Larry Barnett are married, and Steve has three sisters (and a daughter and two sons). Because there are so many women in their immediate families, surgeries give them a chance to talk about guy stuff.

But their main focus in the operating room is all business - with some attitude, of course.

As Steve Barnett works on extracting and replacing the broken implant from the woman's hip - metal has fused onto bone, making for a complicated, unpredictable procedure that will take 3½ hours - Van Halen blares out of a portable stereo, followed by Talking Heads and U2.

You half expect Barnett's father, 69, to tell him, "Turn that noise down," but he doesn't.

SHARING

Some fathers and sons bond over ball games.



MARK RIGHTMIRE, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Some bond over beers. Some never bond.

The Barnetts bond over things like hip joint mechanics, the latest in titanium-stem implants and bone cement.

About seven years ago, when Steve Barnett started doing surgeries with his father, Larry Barnett sometimes would get impatient.

Sometimes, he would be a dad.

"Ah, come on," Larry Barnett would say.

"Then he'd take over and start doing the surgery," Steve says with a laugh.

Actually, his father has been pretty cool, Steve says.

"He has never tried to force me to do stuff his way," the younger Barnett says. "When I look back over the years, not only did I learn from him, but he was also taking things from me, and always has been interested in learning new stuff that I've picked up in my training."

"We've always had a good relationship and always have shared stuff back and forth."

Larry Barnett is an old-school doctor, a UC Berkeley graduate who went to medical school at Stanford and has been licensed to practice medicine in California for 44 years.

These days, he's more of a general orthopedic surgeon than his son is.

Steve Barnett also went to UC Berkeley but earned his medical degree from the Boston University School of Medicine.

The younger Barnett completed a year-long fellowship in 2001 at the Institute for Bone

and Joint Disorders in Phoenix, studying under well-known orthopedic surgeon Dr. Anthony Hedley.

Steve Barnett, who has been at St. Joe's for seven years, performs 350 to 400 hip and knee surgeries a year; his father, 75 to 100. They work together a couple of times a month.

Father and son even live near each other, in Villa Park.

Err, joined at the hip? Yeah, you could say that.

REWARDS

Initially, the oldest of Steve's three sisters was pegged to follow her father into medicine.

Instead, she became a lawyer (a field requiring different, though equally sharp, tools).

Steve, who always loved to build stuff and tinker with things, stepped in.

Over the years, younger patients have begun to opt for hip and knee surgeries, as advances in technology (like titanium alloy) have resulted in implants that work and feel better than ever before.

The Barnetts say nothing is more satisfying than having a patient wake up from surgery and, a few days later, watching them move around with little pain.

Bone doctors crunch, whack, staple and reconfigure patients back into health.

It's exacting, demanding work.

Steve Barnett's athleticism is put to good use during the surprisingly strenuous surgeries. He likens it, at times, to woodworking.

TEAM: Surgeons Steve Barnett, left, and his father Lawrence Barnett wear sterile suits and headgear during an operation at St. Joseph Hospital in Orange.

"We need the large femoral extractor," Steve Barnett says to an assistant, and you are almost afraid to see what ghastly looking instrument she swiftly produces.

The team works seamlessly on the patient, carefully removing the damaged implant without breaking apart too much of her bone.

Head surgeon Steve Barnett remains focused.

"He doesn't even seem to blink - he's like a machine," says Ray Kaveh, a representative of hip-implant manufacturer Stryker. Kaveh assists during surgeries by making sure doctors have at their hands the correct stems, bearings and other joint-replacement pieces.

When the Barnetts and their assistants finally are able to remove the damaged implant and replace it with a new one, they use cadaver bone to firm up the woman's femur.

Fittingly, U2's "Sunday, Bloody Sunday" is playing.

Looking at the work the Barnetts have performed before the woman's thigh is sewn back up, it's hard to imagine that, in a day or so, she'll be up and about, testing her new hip during physical therapy.

Larry Barnett has to skip out before the surgery is completed to meet with patients in his office.

"Overall, when we operate together, it's usually pretty laid back," Steve Barnett says.

"There are certain things I do that drive my father crazy. Like using drains. My father thinks drains are for sissies."

Steve Barnett insists that patients be fitted with wound-draining devices after knee surgery; his father insists the drains aren't always needed - that the fluid eventually will be absorbed by the body.

"He's always blabbing about that," Steve Barnett says with a smile.

Sure, dude - rip your father when he's not in the operating room to defend himself.

Larry Barnett preferred to let his son do the talking - mainly because he feels the way many fathers do about their sons.

Proud.