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## AREA

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### Spinal surgery — a family affair for the Watkins father-son team

BY GARY WALKER

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Like father, like son.

The doctors Watkins — Robert III and Robert IV — are Marina del Rey-based orthopedic spinal surgeons as well as family members. While it is not unusual to see father-son medical teams, it's not often that they practice the same discipline.

"I do come across [father- son teams] on occasion, but not in the same practice," says Cyndee Woelfle, hospital administrator at Centinela Freeman Regional Medical Center in Marina del Rey.

"It is a bit unusual."

The orthopedic surgeons are co-directors of the Marina Spine Center at Centinela Freeman Regional. Besides sharing DNA and a last name, both doctors exhibit a passion for their chosen specialty, considerable knowledge regarding spinal surgery and a strong commitment to improving the lives of their patients.

Robert Watkins III is recognized as one of the state's premier spinal surgeons. His patient list includes numerous professional athletes, and he has been a consulting physician for practically all of Los Angeles's professional sports teams.

When Dr. Frank Jobe, team doctor for the Los Angeles Dodgers and Watkins' former partner, needed surgery himself earlier this year, the famed orthopedic sports specialist called on his former partner Robert Watkins to operate on him.

The elder Watkins is a founding member of the North American Spine Institute, said to be the largest spine society in the United States. His expertise includes the treatment of sports-related orthopedic injuries to the neck and back. Watkins is also the author of several books on spinal injuries, and like his son, after graduating from medical school, received further training in Europe.

In an April interview, father and son discussed their reasons for becoming orthopedic surgeons, their respective admiration and love of the profession and how new technology has allowed spinal surgeons to

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improve the lives of their patients.

"I wanted to be an orthopedic doctor since I was a very young boy," the elder Watkins began.

Growing up in Memphis, Tennessee, he gravitated to orthopedic surgeons at his church, who served as his professional advisors and mentors.

Trained at Los Angeles County Hospital and later at Rancho Los Amigos, he encountered more physicians in his discipline of spinal surgery.

"When you're associated with people who do this for a living, your admiration and respect for them, and the difficulty for that sub-specialty grows," he said.

The younger Watkins, whose areas of expertise include disc replacement and spinal deformities, decide to follow in his father's footsteps upon his enrollment at the University of Southern California.

"Sometime in college, I looked at my father's job and really began to develop an appreciation for what a great job that he has," he said. "It's a long, arduous process to get there, but you also get to accomplish a lot of things along the way, like gaining new skills and learning new techniques.

"It's a real challenge, but at the end of the day you're helping people. What a unique job that is, to be able to do both of those things."

Brad Thompson, a 43 year- old Playa del Rey attorney, can attest to the treatment and surgical prowess of the younger Robert Watkins.

Thompson was on vacation in Costa Rica last year with his wife and two young sons when he began to lose mobility in his legs. Forced to cut his vacation short, he saw a physical therapist who led him to Watkins.

"I heard that they were renowned spine specialists, so I met with both of them," Thompson said in a recent telephone interview.

Watkins IV performed a microdiscotomy on Thompson, which involves repairing herniated discs in the spine.

"I am now pain-free," the attorney said happily. "It's a huge relief."

Both men say technology has played a vital role in the evolution of spinal surgery, and the senior Watkins is particularly impressed with the strides the medical profession has made over the years.

"The number one thing that improved our diagnostic abilities were the imaging studies," he said. "In the early '60's and '70s, we didn't have the MRIs and all of the different ways of seeing the inside anatomy and relating that to the physical examination of the patient. So, the imaging studies have been an overwhelmingly important thing in our business."

Microscopic surgery has also been a major benefit to the medical profession, along with non-operative rehabilitation programs, says Watkins.

"I gave my first talk on core stabilization training to the Professional Doctors Meeting in 1981, with Dr. Jobe," said the elder surgeon.

"The ability to do these types of non-operative programs in high-performance athletes has been a huge advance in non-operative care, and it's made surgery more successful and allowed us to not have to recommend surgery, because we have good non-operative

treatment," he explained.

"I've been fortunate to come into the field at a time when there's been an explosion of new techniques and new devices that are being used, like artificial discs, image guided surgery," the younger Watkins added. "I'm really impressed by a lot of the new technology and how they can really help people have safer surgeries."

The surgeons say that although new technology has played a critical role in enhancing medicine, it is equally important to use the new procedures only when they are necessary.

"If the old traditional surgery is what's best for the patient, then that's the thing to do," said the younger Watkins, who specialized in image-guided spine surgery at the suggestion of his father. During image-guided surgery, the surgeon sees a three-dimensional view of the bone during surgery.

"We have a sensor that goes on the patient and a sensor on the instrument," Watkins IV explained.

Cameras tell the surgeon where the operating screw is going in relation to the bone.

"The images go into a computer, the computer generates the picture, so you have real time with all of your instruments," said his father. "It's like shooting down a fighter plane five miles away."

Both surgeons suggest that when looking for a spinal surgeon, one should consider family and friends who have had back surgery.

"That's not an unreasonable place to start," the elder doctor believes. "A doctor who cares about your friend or neighbor, who had a personal touch with that person, and built an element of trust."

Woelfle believes that both surgeons, particularly the elder Watkins, has given an additional measure of credibility to Centinela Freeman.

"We've been very fortunate to have Dr. Watkins join our staff," she said. "He really does give us a level of clinical excellence that the residents of the Marina have been deserving for a long time."

Thompson calls the doctors "great professionals" and says that Watkins IV is a "great technician."

Recently, Robert Watkins IV and his wife presented his father with a new baby, Robert Watkins V. While no one knows if the youngest member of the family will follow his father and grandfather into the family business, Watkins IV knows what he wants his infant son to be in the next 18 to 20 years — "a defensive back for (USC football Coach) Pete Carroll," he said with a smile. Another USC graduate? Like father, like son.

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