

10 of the most famous spine surgeries in history

Written by [Laura Dyrda](#) | Monday, 04 August 2014 13:08

Here are 10 spine surgeries made famous for pioneering in the field, the patient being treated and the impact these particular procedures had on American culture and society.

Please contact Laura Dyrda with any additional suggestions for notable spine surgeries in history at ldyrda@beckershealthcare.com.

First spine surgery ever. Spine surgery is more than 5,000 years old, according to "[History of Minimally Invasive Spine Surgery](#)" — an article penned by Larry T. Khoo, MD, A. Fahir Ozer, MD, Murat Cosar, MD, and Farbod Asgarzadie, MD. The first surgery was recorded in Egyptian mummies from 3000 B.C. and advanced through the years to 390 B.C. when Hippocrates proposed the first traction procedure. However the first operative spinal surgery treatment was performed in the 7th century by Paulus of Aegina.

John F. Kennedy's back surgery. Back pain was a primary source of John F. Kennedy's discomfort throughout his life and he underwent spine surgery in 1954 that nearly killed him. President Kennedy suffered from chronic back pain after injuries related to his days playing football and serving in World War II. He experienced a vertebrae collapse while still in his 30s, according to a *Time* magazine [article](#). He found it difficult to climb stairs, put on shoes and complete other simple tasks. Physicians of the day prescribed pills and amphetamine shots to relieve the pain. After undergoing surgery in 1954, the then-Senator Kennedy suffered postoperative coma and septicemia, according to a UofM Health [report](#). In all, he underwent five surgical procedures for back pain, the last in 1957, and continued to receive conservative care for the rest of his life. He wore a back brace as president, which may have contributed to the severity of his assassination in 1963, and often used crutches when out of public view.

First surgical scoliosis correction in America. Russel Hibbs, MD, performed the first scoliosis surgical correction in America at New York Orthopedic Hospital in 1914. This came more than 50 years after French surgeon Jules Rene Guerin first began apply surgical methods to scoliosis correction. Dr. Guerin attempted the treatment on 1,349 patients, according to a ScolisSmart Clinics [report](#), to reduce the visible impact and realign the spinal column. Dr. Hibbs brought the surgery to America. He is also credited as a pioneer in spinal fusion surgery, which he began performing three years before applying it to scoliosis correction. Spinal fusion became common by 1941 and researchers at Alfred I DuPont Institute could assess 400-plus cases before Paul Harrington invented the Harrington Rod procedure in the 1950s.

Peyton Manning's spine surgeries. Quarterback Peyton Manning has [undergone](#) multiple spine surgeries throughout his successful National Football League career, with one of the most controversial being in 2011 when Robert Watkins III, MD, and Robert Watkins IV, MD, performed a single-level anterior cervical fusion for Mr. Manning's disc herniation. The then-Indianapolis Colts quarterback was considered near the end of his career and many questioned whether he'd return to the league. After a year's recovery, the Colts let Mr. Manning go and he was picked up by the Denver Broncos. Any doubt about Mr. Manning's ability as an elite athlete post-spine surgery was quelled when he led the Broncos to the 2014 Super Bowl. He previously [underwent](#) two surgical procedures performed by Richard Fessler, MD, for a bulging disc in the cervical spine.

Texas Governor Rick Perry's 2011 spine surgery. Texas Governor and 2012 Republican presidential candidate Rick Perry [underwent](#) spine surgery at a Houston medical day spa in the summer of 2011. Stanley Jones, MD, an orthopedic spine surgeon and founder of the spa performed the procedure, which used stem cells for healing. The procedure was rare then — performed mostly overseas — and was the first time Dr. Jones had performed it on a patient. Soon after his spine procedure, Gov. Perry announced his candidacy for president and later blamed the surgery and subsequent recovery for gaffes that ultimately led to his campaign's failure.

First artificial disc replacement. Artificial disc replacement was performed in Europe nearly 30 years before Scott Blumenthal, MD, performed the first procedure in the United States in 2000. Dr. Blumenthal conducted research on the procedure and consulted with surgeons in Europe as well as Karin Buttner-Janz, who invented the first FDA-approved artificial disc, according to a Spine-health [report](#). Before inventing the disc, Ms. Buttner-Janz was an East German Olympian and World Champion gymnast. Since 2000, Dr. Blumenthal has performed more than 1,400 cervical and lumbar artificial disc replacements, and the number of surgeons performing the cervical procedures is growing in the United States.

Jennifer Grey's spine surgery. Jennifer Grey hit superstardom when she co-starred with Patrick Swayze in "Dirty Dancing," but her back pain took center stage when she was hospitalized in 2010 before her final appearance on "Dancing With the Stars." She ruptured a disc in her back and then underwent four neck surgeries in 2010 performed by Robert S. Bray, MD, founder of DISC Sports and Spine Center in Marina del Rey, Calif. She'd suffered from back pain since 1987 when she was in a car accident, according to an ABC news [report](#). The surgery was widely covered at the time, as Dancing With the Stars was among the most popular shows on television. Ms. Grey gave several interviews where she discussed her outpatient spine surgery, after which she reported being "pain free."

Human embryonic stem cell use for spinal paralysis. The first patient treated with human embryonic stem cells to treat partial paralysis in a patient's spine occurred in 2010 after a patient

was paralyzed in a car accident. The patient underwent emergency surgery at a regional medical center before being transferred to the Shepherd Center in Atlanta to participate in a clinical trial for Geron's spinal cord injury therapy, according to a *Washington Post* [report](#). A few other patients were later added to the trial before Geron put a halt to their research on spinal cord injury patients. The company said treatment was discontinued to focus on its oncology program, but patients who were already enrolled in the trial would continue receiving treatment. When the trial ceased in 2011, none of the four patients reported adverse events. The trial was highly watched when it began and spinal cord injury treatment remains an opportunity for future research and development.

Dwight Howard's 2012 spine surgery. The then-Orlando Magic basketball star Dwight Howard [underwent](#) spine surgery performed by Dr. Watkins in the spring of 2012. He underwent a minimally invasive procedure for disc herniation after failed non-surgical treatment. The surgery prevented him from participating on Team USA in the summer Olympics but he was able to return to the National Basketball Association. Since the surgery, Mr. Howard has played on a struggling Los Angeles Lakers team and is now a member of the Houston Rockets. His abilities are much-lauded before and after surgery and he's expected to be a standout player again in the 2014 season.

George W. Bush's spine surgery. Former President George W. Bush underwent back surgery for a nagging disc problem and spent much of January 2013 recovering, according to a *National Journal* [report](#). The surgery was performed without much fanfare and not reported until several months after it occurred. The two-term commander-in-chief has maintained a low profile since stepping out of the Oval Office, but was able to attend the dedication of his presidential library later that year in Dallas. In 2013, Mr. Bush also had heart surgery after physicians found a blockage in an artery and in 2014 he underwent a knee replacement surgery in Chicago.

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