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Baylor Performs First POEM Procedures in Texas

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Incision-Free Surgery a Growing Trend for Esophageal Problems

A Baylor Scott & White Health surgeon has performed two Per Oral Endoscopic Myotomies (POEM), marking the first time that this minimally invasive technique has been done in Texas. The two procedures involved patients with achalasia, a rare disorder that prevents proper digestion.

Steven Leeds, MD, performed the POEM procedure, which has quickly grown in popularity worldwide over the past six years. As an incision-free alternative to surgery, the POEM technique represents a larger trend in endoscopic surgery, or "through-the-mouth" procedures.

"This procedure is a major step for surgeons performing surgery without incisions," said Dr. Leeds, an esophageal surgeon on the medical staff of Baylor's Department of Minimally Invasive Surgery. "Surgical endoscopy is paving the way for many new procedures, and the POEM procedure is only the tip of the iceberg."

Seeing as this surgery is new to Baylor, Dr. Leeds performed the procedures as part of a Baylor research study to monitor and evaluate the technique. One of the patients who underwent the procedure did so as an alternative to the Heller myotomy, which is the standard achalasia surgery that requires either an abdominal or chest incision. The other POEM patient had completed the Heller myotomy by a chest approach in 2010 before swallowing difficulties recurred post-surgery.

Achalasia affects about one person in 100,000 per year and happens when someone's valve at the end of their esophagus is unable to relax. As a result, it causes the sphincter (a muscle that acts as the body's gateway for the passage of food and water, and a natural reflux barrier) to remain closed, which causes digestion problems. Symptoms can include regurgitation, weight loss, chest pain and the feeling that "food won't go down."

The POEM procedure takes a camera-equipped tube, called an endoscope, through the mouth into the esophagus. From there, a small hole is made in the lining of the esophagus and the endoscope travels along the muscle layer passing the lower sphincter. There, the layer of muscle causing the obstruction is cut to allow passage of food. The small hole in the esophageal lining is then repaired and the endoscope is removed.

"The procedure is shorter in duration and requires minimal instrumentation," Dr. Leeds said. "And since the POEM procedure does not require access through the abdomen or chest, there is no risk for injuring intra-abdominal organs, especially in patients with previous surgeries."

On the heels of Baylor's successful POEM procedures, physicians expect more surgical endoscopies (POEM included) for patients battling esophageal issues. As Dr. Leeds noted, the minimally-invasive technique affords patients reduced pain, faster recovery and equivalent ability to swallow, compared to the traditional Heller myotomy.

"They leave the hospital without needing pain medications and have no post-operative activity restrictions and minimal diet restrictions," he said. "For the Heller myotomy, patients usually had two days in the hospital and required IV and oral pain medications with a curtailed diet for at least two weeks following surgery. With POEM, most of the patients feel as though they had an upper endoscopy, which entails no pain. They can likely go home the day of surgery, but as a precaution we keep them overnight."

Baylor is one of the few hospitals around the world to offer the POEM procedure, and Dr. Leeds is the only physician in the Baylor Scott & White System who performs it. He will continue to offer this non-invasive option to his patients who are candidates for the procedure.

"This procedure is growing rapidly around the world and is a gateway into many other endoscopic procedures that will continue to flood the surgical community," he said. "Most likely, the Heller myotomy will be taken over by this procedure. In fact, it already has in my practice. Patients will all be offered this procedure as a standard of practice where appropriate."

Dr. Leeds and his surgical team performed the inaugural POEM procedures under the live lens of a recorded camera. The resulting videos were made available to all Baylor staff, students and residents for training purposes with the patients' permission.

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