

Greater Pittsburgh Edition

M.D. NEWS

A BUSINESS AND LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE FOR PHYSICIANS



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By Jean B. Edwards, APR

More than 70 million people visit physicians each year for debilitating spinal and musculoskeletal ailments. Of those, more than 5 million are temporarily or permanently disabled due to spinal problems.

Matt El-Kadi, M.D., Ph.D., of Tri-State Neurosurgical Associates at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (UPMC) Passavant, brings renewed hope for patients who suffer from spinal issues. Before they found Dr. El-Kadi, many of these patients had already endured numerous surgeries without any success. Their lives were spent in debilitating pain, and they had to use large quantities of pain medications just to take the edge off their suffering. Some

were confined to wheelchairs or used walkers to get around. Most had all but given up hope of ever reclaiming some semblance of a normal life in which they could walk, enjoy basic activities and live without pain.

AN UNCOMMON SURGEON WITH A BIG HEART

With his extraordinary skill and expertise, Dr. El-Kadi uses the latest techniques to perform minimally invasive spine surgery that often requires no more than a bandage to cover the minute incision he makes as he methodically follows his plan to remove tumors and repair damaged spines. These minimally invasive

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PHOTO BY MICHAEL REED

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techniques have been associated with fewer complications, less tissue trauma, shorter hospital stays and much faster recoveries. “Every time you step into the operating room, you have to commit yourself to give your very best — and nothing less — for your patient. You can never afford to have a bad day when you work on someone’s spine.”

Dr. El-Kadi’s uncommon warmth and concern for each one of his patients is evident the moment you see him interact with them. “I view everyone the same, regardless of what they do for a living or who they are.” His humility, kindness and genuine desire to help those in pain are just a few traits that set him apart from other surgeons.

Although he likes to take advantage of new technology, Dr. El-Kadi says he will never risk experimenting on a patient. “I’ll only use a new approach after it’s been tried and tested thoroughly,” he says. “A patient’s safety and a successful outcome must always come first.”

Although he does not dismiss the importance of the technical aspects of spinal surgery, Dr. El-Kadi says he tries to always remember that every patient has a mother, a father, a son or a daughter who is very dear to him or her. “They’re more than just a patient to me. I try to treat everyone like a family member and to always do what’s best for them. Healing is physical, emotional and mental, and you

really have to listen and connect with your patients. It’s very easy for someone to misjudge a patient. Successful spinal surgery comes down to judgment and dignity,” says Dr. El-Kadi, and he has no shortage of either.

A PLAN OF ATTACK

Despite the 1,000s of surgeries Dr. El-Kadi performs, he never views a case as easy or difficult. “Even the most routine surgical procedure has the potential for complications,” he notes, “and regardless of how hard a case may appear, the most difficult part for me is how I prepare the case in my mind. For me, going to surgery is like going to war. You must identify your mission, be very well prepared, flawlessly execute your plan and then return home safe. If you’re not well prepared, then you shouldn’t go.”

Dr. El-Kadi’s special interest includes removal of primary and secondary spine tumors. The minimally invasive techniques and experience he gained as a brain surgeon earlier in his career have served him well as he painstakingly performs delicate spinal procedures. “I really enjoyed doing brain surgery, but now I believe I can really make a change in people’s lives because I can help them return to work and other activities they enjoy.”

As Chief of Neurosurgery at UPMC Passavant and a clinical professor in the Department of Neurological Surgery at

the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, Dr. El-Kadi performs close to 1,000 surgeries a year. However, he's been equally successful in treating patients with medication and other less-invasive approaches. "I emphasize a conservative approach with my patients because I believe surgery should only be considered as the very last option and only in cases of neurological loss of function or when there is relentless, painful pressure on a patient's spine," he explains.

Although his talent and reputation for excellence has made Dr. El-Kadi one of the area's busiest spinal surgeons, he also treats patients throughout the United States.

Dr. El-Kadi focuses exclusively on spinal problems and achieves success where others have failed. The breadth of his clinical knowledge enables him to deliver the highest quality of care, and he's made a significant difference in the lives of many patients. He's a critical thinker, an expert technical surgeon, a gentleman and a caring and empathetic physician for whom his patients and families have developed enormous respect and admiration.

RECLAIMING THEIR LIVES

Linda Filby's quality of life had severely deteriorated until she found Dr. El-Kadi. For 10 years, Filby, a Dunlevy, PA, resident, suffered from a degenerative disc and spinal stenosis. "The last five years were the worst because I could hardly get out of bed," she says. "When I first met with Dr. El-Kadi, I told him I wanted my

Erin Donovan, P.A., works closely with Dr. El-Kadi.

life back, and that's exactly what I got. In fact, I actually walked to my bed after surgery." Now a teacher and mother of two, Filby swims and walks without pain. She continues to undergo physical therapy and has some restrictions when lifting, but says she feels wonderful. "Dr. El-Kadi is awesome. He's always smiling, and he's so personable. I think he's such a great doctor."

Beverly Goddard's family physician recommended she see Dr. El-Kadi for an anterior cervical discectomy. Goddard, a Clarington, OH, resident, used a walker to get around until she became so debilitated that she was confined to a wheelchair. "My body was numb from my breast region to my toes," she explains. Dr. El-Kadi performed a surgery on the anterior cervical spine, and now, Goddard is making remarkable progress in her recovery. "He's an excellent physician and surgeon and really knows what he's doing. He doesn't beat around the bush, and I like that." Goddard continues to receive physical therapy and is amazed by her progress. "I could actually walk the next morning after surgery," she exclaims. "It was just unbelievable."

A PARTNER TO PHYSICIANS

When physicians refer patients to a surgeon for specific medical issues, nothing can be more frustrating than the inability to reach or communicate with that surgeon.

Gordon R. Gold, M.D., PCP, speaks highly of Dr. El-Kadi as both a colleague and a surgeon. "Dr. El-Kadi is always available to me, seven days a week, even on a Sunday. If one of my patients has an abnormal MRI, I know I can count on Dr. El-Kadi to be available to discuss my patient's condition and to see my patient for a consultation as quickly as possible," says Dr. Gold. Dr. El-Kadi has earned the reputation as an extremely talented surgeon, yet Dr. Gold says Dr. El-Kadi is not "gung ho" to operate on patients. "He takes a very conservative approach and likes to try several different approaches, which often work and eliminates the need for my patients to undergo surgery," says Dr. Gold. "He chooses surgery only when it's absolutely the last alternative."

"From a peer standpoint, I believe three things distinguish Dr. El-Kadi from other spinal surgeons: reputation, quality and availability. He's the neurosurgeon of choice in my book, and I believe he's the best around. In fact, he's treated my wife, and he recommended a number of alternative therapies that have brought her significant relief and eliminated the need for her to undergo surgery."

"I believe other physicians refer patients





PHOTO BY MICHAEL REED

In his office at UPMC Passavant, Dr. El-Kadi proudly displays a photo on his wall of his mentor, Alexander N. Konovalov, M.D., Ph.D., who has been the Director of the esteemed Burdenko Neurosurgery Institute in Moscow, Russia, for 32 years and is the foremost figure in Russian neurosurgery.

to me because they trust me, and trust is a function of two things: character and competence,” says Dr. El-Kadi. “I’m always available to physicians any time of the day or night, seven days a week. I take great pride in promptly returning phone calls or responding to e-mails because I believe you must be accessible and available when you’re needed.”

As a primary care physician with Schogel & Fardo Family Medicine, Barbara Fardo, D.O., was eager to share her experience with Dr. El-Kadi. “He is extremely accessible to his primary care physicians. When the need arises, Dr. El-Kadi is fast and quick to get my patients in for appointments, not to mention that he is very thorough in providing follow-up and feedback.” Dr. Fardo further remarks that she has also recommended family to Dr. El-Kadi,

and if she is ever faced with her own needs for specialized attention, then Dr. El-Kadi will be her first choice. “Dr. El-Kadi has incredible skill and talent. He can be relied upon for his professionalism. He works with the team and stays involved in the patient’s care. Dr. El-Kadi never fails to meet our high expectations.”

BEHIND HIS SUCCESS: TRUST AND RESPECT

I had the privilege of accompanying Dr. El-Kadi on hospital rounds recently to check in on several patients that had just undergone surgery earlier that same day. Much to my surprise, all but one patient was up and around and had little or no pain.

One woman had lost the use of her right arm for more than a year and was confined to a wheelchair prior to surgery. Just a few hours after surgery, she was walking. She greeted Dr. El-Kadi with a high five, using her previously immobile arm. I watched in amazement as she ate dinner with her right hand that, merely a few hours ago, she hadn’t moved in over a year. The look on her face as she waved goodbye to us said volumes without her uttering a word.

A man in his late 30s had just returned hours earlier from surgery in which Dr. El-Kadi had removed a sausage-sized tumor from his spine. The young man had endured numbness in his legs for months and suffered with excruciating pain for some time before his surgery. He was all smiles as we entered his room and was quick to stand up on his own and shake

Dr. El-Kadi’s hand to thank him for giving him back his life.

The last patient we saw that Saturday had just returned from the recovery room. He was only minutes out of surgery, and he had undergone a lengthy, extensive procedure to remove a tumor from his spine. Although still somewhat bleary from the anesthesia, he managed a smile, a thank you and a thumbs up for the man who gave him more time to spend with his wife and children.

What was striking was the enormous trust and respect these patients had for Dr. El-Kadi. They comfortably joked and interacted with him and weren’t shy to reach out with a hug. “This is what it’s all about,” says Dr. El-Kadi. “This is why I’m a surgeon. It’s such a great privilege to be the recipient of my patient’s trust and to be part of their recoveries.”



The caring staff (L-R): Diane Moses, scheduler; Dottie Games, scheduler; Amanda Salinetto, R.N.; Erin Donovan, P.A.; Dr. El-Kadi; Julie Larko, P.A.; Allison Young, nurse; Kasha Doyle, nurse; Christina Hughes, nurse; Heather Orluske, nurse

Performing complex, minimally invasive spinal surgery is both mentally and physically demanding work. As he meticulously works on patients' spinal columns, Dr. El-Kadi frequently must stand in uncomfortable positions for long periods of time. "It's very tiring, and my days are very long and sometimes require me to be in surgery even on Saturdays," he says. What Dr. El-Kadi looks forward to the most is returning home to his wife, Liberty, and their two children, daughter Jenny, 15, and son Mikey, 11. "They are the most important thing in my life, and they help keep me balanced with such a demanding schedule and are very supportive of the long hours that are required of a spinal surgeon."

Another prominent person in Dr. El-Kadi's life is his mentor, Alexander N. Konovalov, M.D., Ph.D., who has been the Director of the esteemed Burdenko Neurosurgery Institute in Moscow, Russia, for 32 years and is the foremost figure in Russian neurosurgery. "He taught me how to perform microsurgery of the brain, but, more importantly, he taught me that no matter how bad things are on the outside, you have to put a smile on your face and listen to your patients." A photo of Dr. Konovalov hangs on the wall above Dr. El-Kadi's computer at his UPMC Passavant office.

Originally interested in Greek philosophy, Dr. El-Kadi decided to pursue a career in medicine. "I was always intrigued by the brain, memory and the way people think and behave. The function of every single organ originates in the brain."

Dr. El-Kadi received his medical degree from Second Moscow

State Pirogov Medical Institute. He completed his residency in neurosurgery at the Burdenko Neurosurgical Institute in Moscow. He was a research fellow in the department of neurosurgery at Los Angeles County + University of Southern California Medical Center in Los Angeles and completed a surgical internship in the department of surgery at the same institution. He also completed a clinical fellowship in neurosurgery at the University of Connecticut. In addition, Dr. El-Kadi completed his residency in neurosurgery at West Virginia University and was a fellow in neurosurgery at Allegheny General Hospital with an emphasis on complex spine cases with instrumentation.

In 1999, he joined another internationally known neurosurgeon, Joseph Maroon, M.D., FACS, and together they have built one of the largest neurosurgical practices in the area. Currently, Dr. El-Kadi is the Chief of Neurosurgery at UPMC Passavant and clinical professor in the Department of Neurological Surgery at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. This department is one of the strongest and biggest departments in the country. It is among the largest to receive research grants in the United States, and, clinically, more than 8,000 major neurosurgical procedures are performed annually in the department.

It is no wonder that Dr. El-Kadi's success is recognized across the United States. He is confident and capable in giving patients a new lease on life. He cares to make a difference and to be accountable in every facet of his specialty. ■