

Joint implant has pianist playing a happy tune again

Jim Johnson, pianist and bandleader of the Memphis-based Jim Johnson Orchestra, has made a living working his magic at the piano for more than three decades. So when osteoarthritis connected to a thumb injury began making playing piano more and more painful for Jim, he worried that his days at the keyboard were over.

“Playing piano was my livelihood,” Johnson said. “I basically thought I was through.”

That’s before Jim learned about the pioneering work done by Drs. Mark Jobe and James Calandruccio on a thumb joint implant called the Orthosphere. Development of the implant was done in association with Wright Medical Technology, Inc., with support from The Campbell Foundation.

“Dr. Jobe plays the piano, so we spoke the same language,” Johnson said. “We talked about my injury and his research. He had great empathy for my condition, but he was not sure the surgery would help me. He had never done it on a piano player before.”

Johnson had some anxieties about the then still experimental procedure, but he decided he had nothing to lose. At that point, he couldn’t use his left thumb at all.

“Jim had very localized arthritis in one joint, where most patients have this problem in many joints,” Dr. Jobe said. “But Jim was highly motivated. Playing piano is the love of his life.”

Other procedures for the same problem involve fusing the joint, which causes complete restriction of movement, or ligament reconstruction, which uses a tendon from the forearm to rework the area. Johnson needed flexion and grip strength for the piano. The Orthosphere procedure best met his needs.

To implant the device, Drs. Jobe and Calandruccio remove the arthritic part of the joint and create small recesses. The sphere, made of zirconia ceramic, is inserted between the metacarpal and the trapezium. Recovery from the procedure takes approximately six weeks, rather than the months of recovery required for other procedures. Wright sells the implant worldwide, with about 80 Orthospheres implanted a month. Campbell Clinic has done over 60 procedures since development of the implant.

“I recovered from surgery quickly but continued physical therapy for a few months until I regained full mobility,” said Johnson. “Now the implant feels so natural that I forget about it.”

Since the surgery, Johnson has been right where he wanted to be, with his hands on the piano keys. His 15-piece orchestra played the Rainbow Room atop Rockefeller Center for the New Year’s Eve Millennium celebration — a spot so coveted, it was booked a year in advance.

“There is no comparison in the way I was to the way I am now,” Johnson said. “I’m back to doing four and five-hour jobs and never leaving the stand. It seems like a miracle, but I know that the real credit goes to the doctors and their research.” In the continued quest to develop better treatment options, Dr. Calandruccio expects to release a new implant through Wright Medical later this year.



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—JIM JOHNSON