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Treatment Centers Aim to Cut the Surgery Out of the Picture

HEALTH CARE: Firm Finds Nonsurgical Way To Ease Back Problems

By KELLY QUIGLEY

It's not every day that you hear a surgeon extol the benefits of not having surgery.

But that's what you'll get if you talk to **Kamshad Raiszadeh**, an orthopedic surgeon who co-founded Mission Valley-based **SpineZone LLC**. The growing company uses specialized medical spine fitness equipment and a doctor-designed exercise regimen to help people strengthen key back muscles and ease back pain — with the ultimate goal of avoiding spine surgery.



Kamshad Raiszadeh

"I think we do too much spine surgery in the U.S.," said Raiszadeh, who also is founder of the **Spine Institute of San Diego**, where he continues to see patients and specialize in minimally invasive procedures. "Spine surgery has its place, but we need to do a better job of selecting out the patients who will do better on their own."

Surgical Costs

He said the high cost of spine surgery — he puts the price for an episode of care at a minimum of \$15,000 per patient, and as much as \$100,000 for spinal fusion surgery — is not sustainable for the health system, at least not at the rate U.S. doctors are performing the procedures.

"We do three times as much spine surgery here than in England," he said. "Pretty soon we're going to work ourselves out of a job. We need to endorse nonoperative measures because surgery is rarely needed to treat back pain."

In 2005 — with encouragement from mentor **Vert Mooney**, a San Diego orthopedic surgeon who died in 2009 — Raiszadeh purchased equipment made by Ocala, Fla.-

based **MedX Ltd.** and devoted about 600 square feet of the Spine Institute's La Jolla office to back strengthening. He called it Core Fitness. "Patients paid cash for the program and they loved it," he said.

In 2007 he formalized the idea. With his brother, **Ramin Raiszadeh**, also an orthopedic surgeon, he launched SpineZone's first stand-alone location in Mission Valley. There are now two other locations in Poway and La Mesa, the latter of which opened last fall.

Kamshad Raiszadeh envisions as many as four more throughout the San Diego area, and potentially in other cities as well. "It's a franchisable model," Raiszadeh said, comparing it to the Woodway, Texas-based **Curves International Inc.** franchise.

Each SpineZone location is equipped with MedX gear and staffed with trainers. A standard eight week program costs about \$800, Raiszadeh said, and customers can pay \$25 per month to return for weekly 20-minute "maintenance" visits to keep up their core strength. In March 2012 SpineZone expects to reach its 50,000th patient visit.

"There's a ton of supporting research that shows back strength goes a long way in treating back pain," said **Scott Leggett**, an exercise physiologist who serves as CEO of Carlsbad-based **Surgery One LLC**, which manages outpatient surgery centers. "It's a very simple idea but it works really, really well. Once people understand the concepts of it, they can self treat."

Back problems usually stem from an inactive lifestyle and too much sitting at work, which leads to weak spine muscles that can become easily tweaked during a strenuous activity, Leggett said.

Even people who exercise regularly tend to ignore their spine. "Everyone wants to focus on their look-good muscles," he said.

SpineZone's demand comes primarily from a payor agreement with **Sharp Community Medical Group**, a network

of more than 225 primary care physicians and 530 specialists in San Diego County. SpineZone completed a two-year study with the group to track the costs of patients who went to SpineZone versus the traditional treatment of physical therapy, injections and surgery, and found savings of 34 percent, with a 59 percent drop in narcotic medication use.

Seeking a Grant

Raiszadeh is now applying to the U.S. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services for a \$1 million grant to perform a similar cost comparison study looking at the elderly population. CMS, through its Health Care Innovation Challenge program, is giving away a total of \$1 billion to applicants who propose compelling new ideas to deliver better health care at lower costs.

"Once we prove this to Medicare, the sky is the limit," Raiszadeh said. His goal is to get a CPT code, short for Current Procedural Terminology code, which Medicare and insurers use to determine medical reimbursements. Without it, patients will have to pay out of pocket.

SPINEZONE LLC

Founders: Kamshad Raiszadeh, CEO and medical director; Ramin Raiszadeh, president.

Revenue: \$600,000 in 2011, \$515,000 in 2010.

No. of local employees: 6 full time, 2 part time.

Headquarters: Mission Valley.

Year founded: 2007.

Company description: A trio of centers directed by spine surgeons and exercise physiologists who help patients with back pain heal themselves through core strengthening on specialized machines.

Key factors for success: The company has partnered with a major physicians group in San Diego and has been able to demonstrate that its alternative approach to surgery can lower overall patient-care costs.