

## Complications in spinal surgery

# Rehab is essential after operations for back pain

Although spinal surgery is safer than ever before, it is still one of the most delicate forms of surgery a patient can undergo.

A web of fine structures, particularly nerves, is involved.

Scientists are still learning about nerve function and how they interact with the brain.

In addition, damage to the spinal cord itself can be devastating, since it affects our ability to walk and therefore our independence and sense of who we are.

“Very serious complications can arise if spinal surgery goes wrong,” says Dr Michael Wong, neurosurgeon and spinal expert from Melbourne’s EPC Health Clinic.

“When we perform spinal surgery, surgeons have to protect against the possibilities of paralysis, loss of sensation, haemorrhage and infection. In addition, complications of neck surgery could involve voice damage or swallowing difficulties and these can be devastating too.

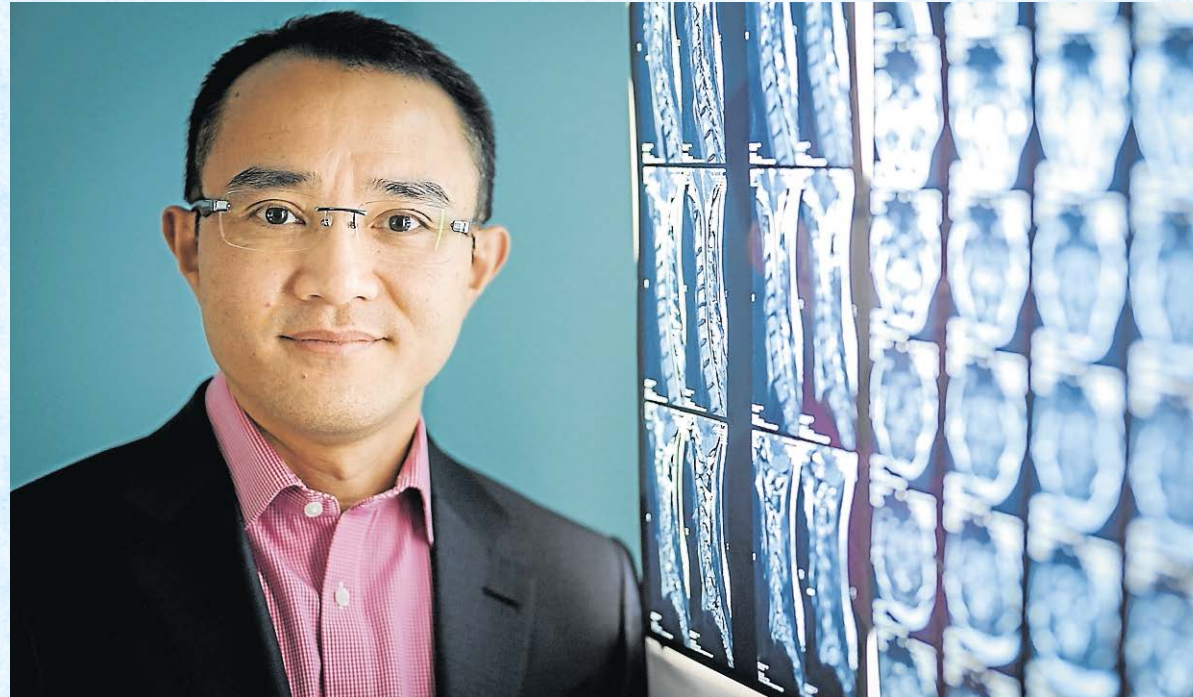
“Fortunately, all these risks are rare. In the right, experienced hands, spinal surgery should be routine. The surgeon should be confident that it is not a risky endeavour. This means the complication rate of spinal surgery done by experienced surgeons should be close to zero.”

One complication of spinal surgery that is often overlooked is chronic pain.

“For most degenerative spine conditions, the aim of the surgery is to relieve the patient’s pain. It is therefore unacceptable that surgery itself should cause more pain in patients,” Dr Wong says.

Reasons for chronic pain after spinal surgery are many.

But, essentially, they relate to the quality



**Dr Michael Wong says despite the delicate nature of spinal surgery, these days the risks are rare.**

Photo: Eddie Jim

of surgery and experience of the surgeons. It is therefore best to seek as much advice as possible from experts before contemplating surgery.

Despite the best efforts, patients can still have residual pain following surgery.

To ensure pain is minimal, whether from muscle damage or complications such as minor infection, patient follow-up is vital.

Once you have recovered from surgery, ongoing physiotherapy, exercise and education are important in maintaining spinal health.

Rehabilitation involves exercise and

therapies designed to ensure long-term wellbeing.

The goal is not only for patients to be pain free, but to regain the quality of life they had before their back became painful.

Pain management will be the highest priority.

Today, sophisticated pain management is available, including self-administered opioid drugs and meditation programs.

Surgeons and physiotherapists will also assess the relationship between muscle pain and any incisions you had during surgery. Fortunately, today’s minimally invasive

surgery means that less tissue is cut, so there is less blood loss and time needed for muscles to knit together again.

Some muscles will need to be completely retrained, including those whose performance has been impaired by chronic pain in the period leading up to the back surgery. Many patients are asked to follow a physiotherapy and exercise program for many months.

“So it’s important to remember that you will need to think about and take part in at least some rehab work after your back operation,” Dr Wong says.