



UNNECESSARY ORTHOPAEDIC SURGERY:

Finding the right solution with an expert medical opinion

featuring Dr. John Mayhew, leading sports injury specialist
and part of our expert network

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Orthopaedic conditions impact a large segment of the population in Australia, affecting more people than any other national health priority area.¹ A staggering 6.9 million Australians reported having arthritis and other musculoskeletal conditions in 2014-15, and this number is expected to rise.²

As the population ages, musculoskeletal conditions are becoming a growing burden, with two of the most common orthopaedic conditions—arthritis and back pain—affecting an increasing number of Australians.

For example, while it is estimated that one in four knee or hip replacement surgeries for people with osteoarthritis are unnecessary,⁶ these procedures continue to be performed at an alarming pace. And there's no sign of this abating: The incidence of total knee replacements and total hip replacements in Australia for osteoarthritis is estimated to rise by 276% and 208%, respectively, by 2030.⁷ According to a professor at the University of New South Wales, about half of orthopaedic surgical procedures have no scientific evidence from randomised trials proving they work any better than non-operative treatment.⁸

As orthopaedic conditions become increasingly prevalent, the number of orthopaedic surgeries performed annually has risen in tandem. There were approximately 5.3 million orthopaedic surgeries in the U.S., Japan, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the U.K. in 2010—this number is expected to reach 6.6 million by 2020.⁹

When it comes to a procedure like spinal fusion, the sharp spike in the number of surgeries may be attributed to factors such as technological advances (including the development of new diagnostic techniques), an aging population, and increasing quality of life expectations that make patients more apt to seek a surgical solution.

This makes it more important than ever to weigh the pros and cons of surgery for treating an orthopaedic condition, especially when a non-surgical treatment may be just as effective in bringing about a positive outcome. In the most troubling cases, patients end up undergoing unnecessary procedures that leave them no better, or worse off, than before.

According to sports medicine physician and specialist in our expert network, Dr. John Mayhew, the source of the problem is often surgeons who decide to operate on patients based strictly on the findings from an X-ray or MRI.

Osteoarthritis is the second-most common chronic health issue in Australia, affecting nearly 10% of the population.³

1 in 5

Australians over age 45 have osteoarthritis⁴

36%

rise in the rate of total knee replacements due to osteoarthritis⁵

27%

of our members had their treatment modified after using the Expert Medical Opinion service

'The X-ray or scan makes the diagnosis, but the decision for surgery needs to be based on a patient's symptoms', says Dr. Mayhew. 'Are we actually going to improve their quality of life? Not just make the X-ray look better'.

Dr. Mayhew cites the use of arthroscopic surgery (a procedure that involves inserting a small camera inside the joint) to treat osteoarthritis of the knee as an example of a procedure that is overused, sometimes with negative consequences. He treats his own patients based on their symptoms, not just on what the X-ray shows.

According to Dr. Mayhew, physicians should first look at non-surgical ways of treating an orthopaedic condition. This is especially important considering that surgical intervention comes with several risks, including pulmonary embolism, deep vein thrombosis,

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and post-operative infections. 'We should be using physical therapy, weight loss, bariatric surgery, and injection-type therapies rather than orthopaedic surgery at times', he says.

According to General Practitioner Dr. Amandeep Hansra, another problem is when patients are told by their treating physician that surgery will relieve their pain, and then are told that surgery is unnecessary when they finally see a surgeon.

'Waiting several weeks to see a surgeon only to be told that you need to do physio or look at conservative treatment methods is often not what patients expect or want to hear', says Dr. Hansra. 'Patients believe they need surgery to relieve their pain—it is incumbent upon physicians to think of how we can stop this cycle and reduce the number of unnecessary surgeries'.

A good example of this is from Toby Hemming, who had suffered from back pain for several years. Toby's GP referred him to a surgeon who recommended surgical intervention. Toby reached out for an Expert Medical Opinion and a world-renowned expert reviewed his case. The expert concluded that surgery was unlikely to result in any improvement and instead suggested physiotherapy, maintaining it would offer better long-term results.

'Despite having it laid out for me in a report from a leading expert, I still found it hard to take my mind away from surgery being the right answer', said Toby. 'I had pain and it felt like surgery was the only way to stop it, especially after a surgeon told me about this option'.

Not only can the surgery be the wrong choice at times, but the patient expecting it's the right choice can hinder their best chance at recovery.

Getting an accurate diagnosis and the right treatment for a chronic orthopaedic condition can make a huge difference in reducing pain, restoring mobility, and improving a person's quality of life.

Several other orthopaedic conditions can be successfully treated without surgery, often leading to better patient outcomes, notes Dr. Mayhew. One example is Achilles tendon rupture.

'The available evidence now says that non-surgical treatment of that is as good as, if not better than, surgical

treatment', says Dr. Mayhew. Other examples of conditions that may fare better with non-surgical treatment include medial ligament tears of the knee, major hamstring tears, and osteoarthritis of the hip, which Dr. Mayhew says is often unnecessarily treated with arthroscopic surgery.

The prevalence of back pain among Australians may encourage many to seek a surgical solution. However, Dr. Mayhew says that spinal fusion (in which vertebrae at different levels are fused together) is an overdone procedure that doesn't normally help resolve lumbar spine pain. 'For people with non-specific back pain to fuse their disks because they look degenerate on an X-ray is a very poor operation to do, and with a very poor outcome', he says.

In many cases patients would be better served by first seeing another specialist rather than immediately seeing a surgeon, according to Dr. Mayhew. 'People go from a sore knee straight to seeing an orthopaedic surgeon and he's really only got one treatment he can offer you', he says.

He adds that a physical therapist or other specialist can help a patient explore non-surgical treatment options that may successfully resolve their issue.



“My quality of life has really improved since I received the expert's report and recommendations.”

Ian, whose diagnosis and treatment plan for a chronic ankle condition were modified after review by one of our specialists.

This reinforces the importance of getting the right support and guidance when making a treatment decision for an orthopaedic condition.

A patient who can be successfully treated for an orthopaedic condition without surgical intervention does not face the risk of post-surgical complications and can end up with a better outcome.

This is illustrated by the case of a young woman whose treating physician had misdiagnosed her with scoliosis and recommended spinal surgery. After her case was reviewed by one of our leading orthopaedic surgeons, the woman was given a different diagnosis. Not only did she not have scoliosis, the expert advised against spinal surgery and instead recommended pain relief medication along with further testing.

This reinforces the importance of getting the right support and guidance when making a treatment decision for an orthopaedic condition. This is especially true when it comes to surgery, with its attendant risks and the possibility of non-surgical alternatives that might be just as—if not more—effective.

'Getting the appropriate advice is paramount', says Dr. Mayhew. 'An independent, non-biased opinion on what is best managed is very useful'.



“My doctor was impressed”, said Nancy after sharing the detailed direction from the expert with her treating doctors. This action plan could change her life.

Nancy, who reached out to our service and discovered she didn't need spinal surgery after all.



About Dr. John Mayhew, leading sports injury expert BSc, MBChB, DipObst, DipSpMed(Hon), DOccMed

Dr. Mayhew is a highly respected sports doctor and alumnus of the faculty of medical and health sciences of The University of Auckland with a diploma in occupational medicine. He shares his experience in the book *Doc Mayhew: Rugby's Medicine Man*. Dr. Mayhew runs a sports medicine practice at Auckland's Millennium Institute, is the doctor for the New Zealand Warriors, and is clinical director at Sovereign Insurance.

¹https://www.msk.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/APWS_Infographic.pdf

²<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports-data/health-conditions-disability-deaths/chronic-musculoskeletal-conditions/overview>

³<https://sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2017/03/10/the-six-top-chronic-health-issues-affecting-australians--new-res.html>, and the rate of sub-acute hospitalisation is rising dramatically (cite <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/chronic-musculoskeletal-conditions/osteoarthritis/contents/treatment-management>

⁴<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/chronic-musculoskeletal-conditions/osteoarthritis/contents/what-is-osteoarthritis>

⁵ibid.

⁶<https://www.hospitalhealth.com.au/content/clinical-services/news/1-in-4-joint-replacement-surgeries-unnecessary-784030259#axzz5iuWqj17b>

⁷<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/30797228>

⁸<https://www.illawarramercury.com.au/story/4659510/many-operations-more-harmful-than-beneficial/>

⁹<https://www.bionity.com/en/studies/7778/epidemiology-major-orthopedic-surgery-on-the-rise-as-the-global-elderly-population-continues-to-grow.html>

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