

Chicago Tribune

Meet Dr. Richard Berger, Chicago hip and knee surgeon to the likes of Archie Manning, John Slattery and more

By TRACY SWARTZ



Dr. Richard Berger chats about his background in his Rush University office on Jan. 7. (Abel Uribe / Chicago Tribune)

Archie Manning doesn't remember who first told him about Dr. Richard Berger. The Hall of Fame quarterback said perhaps his son, Peyton Manning, recommended the Chicago orthopedic surgeon. Or maybe it was friends in Dallas or Birmingham. Former president George W. Bush also had been a Berger patient, you know.

Debbie Korb, who works with celebrities as a real estate broker in New York City, didn't want to say who initially told her about Berger. "When my knee started to act up, I called that person and I said, 'What's the name?' And I got it, and I came. And the next thing you know, a friend of mine in New York is ('Mad Men' alum) John Slattery, who a lot of people know. And I said, 'John, I'm going to Dr. Berger.' And I said it was the most luxurious operation I have ever had, not that I've had many," Korb told the Tribune earlier this month. She was visiting Berger for a check-up and to accompany another friend — Bob Savage, the painter and husband of fashion designer Nanette Lepore — to his appointment.

These are but a few of the bold-faced names who have come to Chicago to see Berger, an assistant professor at Rush University Medical Center who pioneered minimally invasive hip and knee replacement. Berger said he replaces the joint without cutting muscles, ligaments or tendons, which means a quicker, less painful recovery. He has been performing this type of hip surgery since 2001 and knee surgery since 2003, but social media is helping to draw attention to him now.

"I treat a lot of patients from around the world who want to come to see me to get a quick recovery. So that's actors and famous people. It's CEOs of companies, and it's sometimes just the teacher down the street who just wants to have their life back quicker," Berger told the Tribune in a recent interview in his office at Rush's orthopedic building on Harrison Street near Ashland Avenue. "Regarding taking care of 'celebrities,' it's of course really nice and an honor to meet people who are famous. I have found, very pleasantly, that almost all of them are just nice, normal people."

Actor Misha Collins, a University of Chicago alum who lives in Los Angeles, came to Chicago last month for a hip replacement to fix a condition he said he got from running a lot. While he was here, he hosted a fan meet-up downtown and shared photos of himself before and after surgery. "Up and walking 2 hours later," he wrote.

"Dr. Berger is a pioneer and the best hip replacement surgeon possibly in the world. Also, I'm convalescing in the Peninsula hotel, which is one of my favorite hotels, and I can order deep dish pizza delivered to my room. It's a no-brainer," Collins told the Tribune via a spokeswoman at the time.

There were 447,000 total hip replacements and 796,000 total knee replacements performed in the United States in 2016, according to research provided to the Tribune by the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons (AAOS), which is based in suburban Rosemont. Berger said he does about 1,500 surgeries a year, typically tackling about 1,000 knees and 500 hips. He became fascinated with motion as a kid watching his dad make the holiday displays for Macy's windows in New York. He studied mechanical engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and used that knowledge to design the instruments he uses in surgery.

For knee or hip surgery, Berger makes a 3- to 4-inch incision and maneuvers around muscle and soft tissue to access and replace the joint. A 10- to 12-inch incision is made in a traditional hip replacement, and the muscles are split or detached from the hip so it's in full view



Dr. Richard Berger, right, chats with his patient, Debbie Korb of New York, on Jan. 7. Berger replaced Korb's knee in 2016. (Abel Uribe / Chicago Tribune)

for the surgical team, according to the AAOS. An 8- to 10-inch incision is made during a traditional knee replacement. The typical recovery timeline for Berger patients is: Walk out of the hospital the day of surgery; drive and return to work the week after surgery; and finish physical therapy four to six weeks after surgery, when they are about 90 percent recovered.

Berger said his technique — which initially drew skepticism from other surgeons — has evolved in the last two decades to become more refined and even less invasive. He's also changed the anesthesia and medications used in his procedures.

"What Dr. Berger has worked hard to do is to do minimally invasive approaches coupled with multimodal anesthesia, which is lots of different ways to block pain pathways so that you feel less discomfort associated with your surgery, and to minimize the surgical approaches to decrease the inflammation from putting the hip or knee in the patient," Dr. Thomas Muzzonigro, a Pennsylvania orthopedic surgeon, told the Tribune. Muzzonigro — who, like Berger, trained at the University of Pittsburgh — serves as the chair-elect of the AAOS Board of Councilors.

Berger said what also sets him apart from other surgeons is his customer service. The father of two said he gives every patient his home phone number and the phone numbers of his team. Berger even checked Slattery's knee in his hotel room before Slattery flew home to New York.

The average cost of a knee replacement in the Chicago area is around \$34,700, and a total hip replacement here is about \$32,800, according to a 2015 report by Blue Cross and Blue Shield. Berger said he charges a "standard fee" to perform surgery, but he declined to disclose that number to the Tribune. He said about 60 percent of his patients carry the insurance that he accepts.

And then for some, there's the cost of travel to Chicago for appointments. Berger said slightly more than half of his patients take an airplane to see him.

Korb said she can take an 8 a.m. plane to Chicago for an appointment with Berger and be home in Manhattan by 9:30 p.m. She said her knee replacement in 2016 was expensive, but "it's so worth it. I mean, it's your knees."

"It was all fine, and they woke me right up, and sure enough, I jumped off that table. Don't say 'jumped,' but I got up, walked up and down the stairs and then went back to the Peninsula where they treat you like royalty. And I thought, this is great, I love this operation," she said. "Now, having said that, the healing time is a little tricky. It's not tricky, it's just — there's no such thing as no pain. The first month was a little hard. There's pain when you wake up in the morning, when you first straighten your knee, but ultimately, it goes away. And now it's like a brand-new knee."

Berger said he recommends various five-star hotels to his out-of-town patients, but the Peninsula in the Streeterville neighborhood "does a better job than most." Manning stayed there as well.

"It's kind of funny. When you walk in the Peninsula hotel in Chicago and you're kind of limping, the bellman and all the people that work there say, 'You're one of Dr. Berger's patients?' They're kind of ready for you," said Manning, who had his right knee replaced by Berger in 2017. Manning said he played nine holes of golf four weeks after surgery.

"Most of the people that I had talked to around the country had had a good experience, and so since then, I've had several people call me. I guess I've been somewhat responsible, maybe some others too, of some friends going to see him, probably another six or seven people."

tswartz@tribpub.com