Debilitating hernia cleared up shortly after U.S. visit

By BARB LIVINGSTONE

For Andy Farvolden, who just turned 70, the worst thing about his hernia was not being able to ski, golf, hike ... or pick up any of his six grandchildren.

The chartered accountant, who still works part time, first had his hernia tentatively diagnosed by his son, a doctor in Baltimore, and then, in Sept. 2013, by his Calgary family doctor.

The following month, his appointment with a consultant surgeon was confirmed for the beginning of June, eight months down the road.

Farvolden was told his actual surgery to repair the hernia would be another four to six months after meeting with the surgeon — in other words, more than a year, minimum, after his initial diagnosis.

“I was aware of the strain in my body. It was uncomfortable to do things in my normal life like standing up for a long time, walking for a long time, lifting and picking up a grandchild off the monkey bars or even bringing in bags of groceries.

“If I went to walk any distance, I felt something different. It restricted what I did.”

And, of course, there was the knowledge of the consequences of not fixing the hernia (which occurs when an organ or fatty tissue squeezes through a weak spot in a surrounding muscle or connective tissue) could be anything from extreme pain to obstruction/strangulation of the bowel, which can lead to death.

In the end, he knew the hernia had to be taken care of and he did not want to “put my life on hold for a year.”

And in Canada, with the realization that “I’m not 30 years old, with a job and young kids — and I wouldn’t be at the top of the list for surgery,” the “very active outdoors” Calgarian decided he had to look elsewhere for the service.

“At my age, I can have years left and I did not want to sacrifice them.”

A widower — his wife, a Calgary family physician for 30 years, died a year and a half ago — Farvolden and his family had a place in Whitefish, Mont., and knew the area well.

“We occasionally had the need to make trips to the (North Valley Hospital) with our kids or with visitors. We knew, and were happy with, that hospital.”

North Valley Hospital is a one-hour drive south of the Canadian border crossing at Coutts, and is located at Highways 93 and 40 in Whitefish, Mont.

A full-service hospital, it also has specialty technologies for gynecological and urological procedures, orthopedic surgeries, single-incision laparoscopic surgeries performed through the navel for a nearly invisible scar and other surgeries including colon, ear, nose and throat, reconstructive and cosmetic.

So with the help of Farvolden’s doctor son, inquiries were made as to the kind of surgery North Valley performs, about the quality of its surgeons and about what kind of traffic the hospital saw for hernia surgeries.

“I was very impressed with the detail that came back to me and in mid-November I made an appointment, got in my car and went to chat with the surgeon.”

He was also impressed that once the Whitefish surgeon found out his son was a doctor, he offered to follow up with him, as well, about his findings and any possible procedure.

“He showed me the openings he had for the procedure at that point — and in fact, he had a cancellation and could have done it the next day.”

That was a little too soon for Farvolden, but as he was heading back to Calgary his phone rang and it was his physician son.

“He had already talked to the surgeon and agreed with his approach completely.”

The father of three says his kids were supportive about his travelling to the United States for the surgery — “they said you have the means (the total cost of his medical services was $6,800), go do it.”

With both father and son confident about the North Valley Hospital operation, Farvolden phoned the hospital when he got home and booked surgery for Dec. 3.

He went in the day before for pre-operation tests and after surgery, stayed in Whitefish for four days.

The hospital called his residence 24 hours and 48 hours after he was discharged to ensure the patient did not require any further medications or assistance regarding his recovery program.

A friend drove him back to Calgary.

A month after his surgery, he returned to North Valley for a checkup and “everything was fine.”

So fine, in fact, he went skiing for the first time since his diagnosis.

As for his experience at North Valley, Farvolden has nothing but positive things to say.

As a finance person, Farvolden says it befuddles him why Alberta, with its fiscal health, does not embrace a position as a medical mecca.

But with no change on the horizon, he is thankful for Montana’s North Valley.

“They are very professional and very caring. They take good care of you.”