BIG TECHNOLOGY, SMALL INCISION.
GOOD NEWS FOR GALLBLAGGERS
By: Clint Webb

Gallbladder disease is extremely common in our society. More than a million surgeries take place across the nation every year, with more than 3,800 taking place in Montana. Nearly half of these surgeries are performed on women between the ages of eighteen and forty-two.

The gallbladder provides the liver with bile storage that is used to assist our bodies with fat absorption. When the gallbladder has stones or is otherwise dysfunctional, this all-important process is delayed and can lead to various levels of pain. Often pain relief and a return to normal liver function require that the gallbladder be removed.

Using small cameras and extended tools, surgeons are now able to work through very small cuts to remove gallbladders and appendixes, to fix hernias, and more. Even though such procedures are minimally invasive now, it has taken thirty years to get to this point, beginning with the introduction of laparoscopy. It’s common in today’s medicine to reduce the need for large incisions in favor of a few small ones in order to perform the same procedure. With the advancement of laparoscopic methods, the weeks or months of recovery time required by large incisions has been reduced to mere days.

In recent years, robot-assisted surgery has been introduced; robotic surgery combines the benefits of laparoscopy with even greater precision, dexterity, and control by the surgeon. The latest addition to this phenomenal practice is single-site robotic surgery for gallbladder removal, which decreases the number of incisions needed from four or five to one. This one area is typically at or around the belly button, allowing for not only a speedy recovery but also a nearly undetectable scar.

There are fewer than 200 surgeons nationwide that are trained in this procedure, and Dr. Ryan Gunlikson, a Board Certified General Surgeon at North Valley Surgical Services, is one of these highly skilled few.

“I consider robotic laparoscopic surgery to be the future of surgery because it offers a more improved patient experience. This includes a shorter hospital stay and better overall surgery outcomes. With my training, I can continue to do the more complex procedures I’ve been doing with traditional laparoscopic techniques for years, but now I can also offer those procedures using the da Vinci robot. This makes the entire surgery less invasive for my patients with the same or even better results.”

The introduction of various laparoscopic methods over the last 30 years began the race for improved ways to treat diseases requiring surgery. The da Vinci surgical robot is the highest level of innovation and precision in laparoscopic procedures. From Dr. Gunlikson’s perspective, the robot provides a much more accurate representation of what a surgeon can see via 3D magnification, and allows for better inter-operative control via the articulating wrist-like instruments. When asked about the importance of having increased dexterity, Dr. Gunlikson said:

“It’s like the surgeon’s head is right in the belly using these amazing tiny little hands working with the aid of 10-fold magnification and high-definition 3D. It doesn’t get any better than that. So the
obvious next step from even the new da Vinci surgery is to do the entire surgery through one nearly invisible port site.”

The gallbladder is the first general surgery procedure to be FDA approved via Single-Site. Gallbladder removal is unique in that it has a simple standardized technique that can be used in a Single-Site procedure because no matter what ails the gallbladder, the same surgery technique is required. This is unlike other illnesses such as an appendectomy or colon removal, where the disease changes the aesthetics of the body part and the actual location of the affected organ can vary from patient to patient.

Dr. Gunlikson performs an average of 300 surgeries and procedures a year at North Valley Hospital in Whitefish. Of those 300, approximately 25 percent are related to gallbladder disease. Roughly 30 percent of all Americans will be affected by gallstones; three out of every ten of those affected will end up needing to have their gallbladders removed entirely. As a general surgeon, Dr. Gunlikson also performs other procedures using robotic and traditional laparoscopic methods, including hernia repairs, appendix removals, and colon and intestinal removal and resections.

Dr. Gunlikson is a proud graduate of Flathead High School and has been practicing in the Flathead Valley since 1999. He is not she when it comes to how much he loves what he does.

“There is excitement and action in being able to immediately help a person versus waiting for medications to take effect,” he said. “When I was in medical school working in the ER, I didn’t want to be left behind when someone was being rushed to surgery. I wanted to go with them. I really enjoy interacting with my patients and getting to know them; I love having a hands-on solution that I can physically perform to help a person feel better.”

Treating a person as a whole rather than a disease is Dr. Gunlikson’s priority. He informs his patients of all the options, outcomes, and potential complications prior to surgery, and answers any questions they may have so that know what to expect even throughout their post-operative course.

“I tell them exactly what I’m thinking and why I’m thinking it, and I engage them in their care,” he says. “The patient is involved in an open dialogue every step of the way.”