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New medical procedure used on Buhl resident

EIRMC doctors used a less-invasive surgery to treat Terry Shelby's aortic aneurysm.

When doctors first informed Terry Shelby that he had an aortic aneurysm -- a potentially fatal bulge in the heart's main artery -- it'd be fair to say he was less than thrilled with his treatment prospects. Traditionally, the condition's only remedy involved rib-splitting surgery that carried with it a long recovery stay and a substantial risk of pneumonia and infection.

Instead, the Buhl native became the first patient in Idaho to receive a new, less-invasive procedure called a thoracic endograft placement. "I was real nervous about the other (surgery), because of it being such a traumatic surgery," Shelby said. "This one, I wasn't so anxious, but I still didn't know what to expect. I sure didn't expect to be going home 24 hours later."

Performed Monday morning by Doctors Michael Denyer and Fritz Schmutz at Eastern Idaho Regional Medical Center, the two-hour procedure involved placing a tube resembling a Chinese finger trap within the artery to reinforce the weakened area.

The tube -- called a graft -- was inserted into an artery near Shelby's groin, where it was then moved into position near the heart. Originally a little bigger than a quarter-inch in diameter when inserted, the tube can expand to more than an inch wide to let blood through -- taking pressure off the weakened artery wall in the process.

The graft has been around in one form or another for about five years, Denyer said, but only recently has it been applied to fix heart ailments.

Denyer said the procedure had two major benefits: a shorter hospital stay and a less-risky, gentler surgery, not to mention a cheaper hospital bill.

Shelby, who doctors believe developed the condition in a car wreck 30 years ago, immediately recognized the new procedure's benefits. And now the doctors can count Shelby's mother, Ruth Penner, as a fan, too. "I was thrilled to learn this was even an option," she said. "Now if we can just keep him off the mountains and out of danger. He's a bit of a mountain man, this one."

As for Shelby's plans when he returns home, it's simple. "See my dogs," he said. "They wouldn't let me keep them here in the room with me."