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Oregon City surgeon turns to Exparel, an injectable non-opioid drug for post-surgical pain



Dr. James
Ballard

The opioid crisis has caused many doctors to look for alternative ways of treating pain besides prescribing narcotics.

Cognitive behavior therapy, acupuncture, spinal cord stimulation and over-the-

counter analgesics are among the tools many are using. Dr. James Ballard, an orthopedic surgeon in Oregon City, has turned to a drug that can be injected during surgery that numbs the pain for up to three days.

"Everybody is interested in how do we lower the narcotics, what strategies we can come up with to do our part?" said Ballard, who specializes in total knee and hip replacements, among other procedures, at the Regenerative Orthopedic Center in Oregon City.

Ballard said Exparel is an important tool in managing post-operative pain and reducing opioid prescriptions. He doesn't have a consulting agreement with the drug's manufacturer, Pacira Pharmaceuticals.

Ballard is new to seeking opioid alternatives. He completed his medical training in the 1990s when the mantra was to treat pain aggressively.

"We threw narcotics at people," Ballard said. "We were unwittingly helping to create this problem."

Now he's trying to address patients'

pain after hip and knee replacement surgery with "multi-modal" pain management, where the pain pathway to the brain is blocked in multiple ways.

Exparel, he said, is "one link in the chain."

"We don't use it in isolation, but as part of a larger strategy," Ballard said.

The drug is a numbing anesthetic packaged in a fat molecule injected during surgery directly at the surgical site and releases slowly over a 24-hour to 72-hour period. It can also be taken during general surgery, oral surgery and Ob-GYN/breast surgery, according to Pacira. Net sales for Exparel were \$66.8 million in 2017's third quarter, a 3 percent year-over-year increase.

Dr. Gustave Fischer, an orthopedic surgeon at Multnomah Orthopedic Clinic who performs procedures at Providence Portland Medical Center, said the drug is fairly controversial in the orthopedic world.

"The company has jumped on the coat tails of the anti-opioid wave of popularity," Fischer said.

While Pacira has advertised 72 hours of pain relief, Fischer found that it works for 24 hours. He uses it in knee replacement surgeries, but still prescribes opioids afterward, but for no more than 30 days, per clinic policy.

He and Ballard said the early window of pain relief means patients can start physical therapy sooner.

"You wake up and don't feel crappy," Ballard said. "You may still need narcotics but way less than before."