

She regained her ability to walk and her love of cooking



Left to right: Yara Roufail and Ramin AmirNovin, M.D.

In the wee hours of the night, surrounded by a half dozen members of his surgical team, Ramin AmirNovin, M.D., a board-certified, fellowship trained neurosurgeon, performed a complex emergency operation on Yara Roufail. She had a fast-growing tumor that would have left her a paraplegic in as little as 48 hours if not removed. Like a sculptor, he chiseled it away from her spine. It was a process he described as “a delicate dance” as he spent six hours dissecting the tumor while fighting to save her life.

Dr. AmirNovin has treated patients at the Inland Neurosurgery Institute (INI) on Casa Colina’s campus for the past seven years. While he performs many scheduled operations at the Casa Colina Outpatient Surgery Center, he is frequently “on call” to see emergency patients at hospitals throughout the Inland Empire and L.A. County.

Yara was brought to San Antonio Community Hospital’s Emergency Room by her husband, Ashraf, on August 5, 2013, after her leg gave out from under her and she fell on a staircase. This wife and mother of two daughters is originally from Egypt and emigrated from Saudi Arabia in 2007. So when she arrived at the hospital, she not only struggled with the pain but the language barrier as well.

She was frightened. She didn’t understand everything spoken in English. And she didn’t understand why she was suffering the past three months from severe back pain. It was so bad that it had kept her from the activities she loved most – preparing her family’s favorite home-cooked meals and shopping with her girls. Her primary care physician had repeatedly told her that it was merely sciatica – a compressed nerve. He had prescribed muscle relaxants.

Dr. AmirNovin could see on the MRI he had ordered that a 2-inch tumor had replaced the bone in her back and was compressing her spinal cord. This cord compression was causing the right leg weakness and numbness in her left leg. What’s more, it created dangerous swelling that was reducing the blood flow to her spinal cord, putting her at grave risk for permanent paralysis if she didn’t have surgery right away.

“This is something that can go from bad to horrible very quickly. Once you are a paraplegic from this condition, it can’t be reversed,” Dr. AmirNovin explained. “That’s why the surgery is considered an emergency.”

Though her husband was understandably worried, he consented to the surgery two days later. Traditionally, she would have had a lengthier surgery that would have required opening her chest. However, in this case, Dr. AmirNovin used an innovative technique to sneak between two nerves with a device to reach from the back to the front of the spine, where he replaced the tumor and the vertebra it had destroyed with a cylindrical titanium spacer. This spacer filled the gap to



permanently hold her body weight and posture. He then continued to stabilize her spine with eight screws and two rods.

She was discharged and transferred to Casa Colina’s Rehabilitation Unit five days later on August 12, where she arrived by ambulance on a gurney with a cast from her shoulders to her waist. Since Yara is an Orthodox Christian, this date also marked the beginning of a two-week period of fasting without meat or dairy in honor of St. Mary. However, her physicians insisted she have protein to keep her strength up for her intensive therapy each day. So Casa Colina’s

chefs prepared seafood for each of her meals.

In the gym, her physical therapists helped her regain her strength and endurance while working on safe ambulation and mobility. Her occupational therapists focused on safely rebuilding her upper body strength as well as her ability to care for herself. Upon learning that she loved cooking, they conducted many therapy sessions in the Activities of Daily Living room, where they taught her how to prepare meals safely without stressing her back.

Just like the other 90% of Casa Colina’s spinal cord injury patients, Yara returned home instead of being discharged to a skilled nursing facility after only two weeks, which far exceeds national and regional averages for her diagnosis (compared to 72% national and 81% regional discharges home). She continued to receive outpatient therapy at Casa Colina for six weeks. Dr. AmirNovin removed her cast in January, confident that her back and spine were fully healed. She quickly felt right at home without it – especially in the kitchen.

“We’re planning to show that we can be great surgeons in



a highly personalized setting,” said Dr. AmirNovin. “With Casa Colina’s new Medical/Surgical Hospital, we’ll be providing world-class, innovative surgical care without needing to send patients elsewhere.”