

Mercy doctor performing, teaching new technique

As the head of Mercy Medical Center's Minimally Invasive Surgery unit, Dr. Thomas J. Swope is always looking for ways to be at the forefront of treatment for his patients.

The parishioner of Immaculate Conception in Towson became the first surgeon in Maryland to perform a single-incision cholecystectomy a year ago.

Single-incision laparoscopic surgery (SILS) is just now taking off as a procedure nationwide.

Dr. Swope is also now training about six or seven mid-Atlantic doctors a month to perform single-incision operations.

"You always want to stay fresh," the 43-year-old doctor said. "I think that's what excited me about this and working with other doctors."

SILS is the latest alternative to traditional four-incision laparoscopic surgery. For Dr. Swope's patients, it is the procedure of choice.

With single-incision surgery, Dr. Swope said, the surgeon can make one small incision behind the belly button and insert a tube through it that holds three individual tubes.

In essence, Dr. Swope said, the surgeon is moving three different incisions all toward the belly button. For example, in a gall bladder surgery, the surgeon replaces one of the tubes with a stitch to reject the gall bladder.

“It’s not really dissimilar to what we do now – it’s the just the placement of the tubes is different,” Dr. Swope said. “It’s essentially the same operation, but all the tubes are coming through the belly button.”

The upside for the single-incision procedure is cosmetically appealing. Traditional laparoscopic surgery can create a 6-inch incision from four separate incisions in the abdomen.

“Of course everyone is more comfortable because the big gain is that it’s nearly scarless,” Dr. Swope said of SILS. “Everything is hidden down in the belly button.”

Philadelphia-based Dr. Paul Curcillo was the first in the world reported to perform the single-incision laparoscopic gall bladder surgery at Drexel University in May 2007. More single-incision procedures began taking place beyond gall bladders, including appendectomies and colon resections.

A native of the Philadelphia suburb of Drexel Hill, Dr. Swope is the brother of Jesuit Father John W. Swope, president of Cristo Rey Jesuit High School in Baltimore. Since arriving in the Baltimore area in the late 1990s, he has found a place for his family to thrive.

All three of his children attend Immaculate Conception School in Towson.

“We’ve been very happy,” said Dr. Swope, “with our move to Baltimore.”