



Kathryn Richardson travels from Santa Barbara for orthopedic care at Providence Mission Hospital.

Brandon King Photography

Road to Recovery

For a Santa Barbara woman, distance is no object when it means receiving the best orthopedic care.

Kathryn Richardson has so much faith in her orthopedic surgeon that ever since her move to Santa Barbara, she's been driving 300 miles round-trip whenever she needs to see him at Providence Mission Hospital.

"When you find the most competent doctor, you're going to travel 150 miles if that's what it takes," Richardson says about her surgeon, Stephen Tocci, MD, chairman of Mission's orthopedic department and director of extremities surgery in the hospital's orthopedic institute.

Richardson's problems began in 2004 when she started experiencing persistent pain in her ankle. She was diagnosed with pigmented villonodular synovitis, or PVNS, a rare but aggressive tumor that destroys healthy bone. It's most often found in the knee, with only 2.5% of cases occurring in the foot or ankle.

Although the tumor isn't cancerous, it can burrow into the bone, and it's challenging to find and remove.

With a different surgeon, Richardson had four surgeries and radiation to remove and shrink the tumor. After a half dozen years, it became clear that the next step was either ankle replacement or fusion.

Looking at a major procedure, Richardson knew she needed the best. She scoured the state looking for a board-certified orthopedic surgeon specializing in ankles who was up for the job. She found him nearby—his office just one stop sign away from the Mission Viejo neighborhood where she lived in March 2011.

Dr. Tocci first did a cleanup operation to give Richardson a little more time before he removed the damaged cartilage and bone from the ankle joint and replaced it with prosthetics in January 2012.

"She did very well with the ankle replacement," Dr. Tocci says. "She got back to walking and her other activities with good pain relief."

Eight years later, another surgery was needed to replace the plastic spacer of the prosthetic joint. However, the bone weakness resulting from Richardson's tumor caused the prosthetic ankle to shift and collapse. Since another ankle replacement surgery would have a high failure rate, fusion was now Richardson's best option.

In an outpatient procedure in April, Dr. Tocci removed the artificial ankle and realigned her ankle joint using a cadaver hip bone and a titanium rod.

"She's doing amazingly well," he says. "It's incredible that you can put somebody's hip bone into the ankle and provide stability and

durability while eliminating pain."

Foot and ankle surgery is Dr. Tocci's niche, and he "can't imagine doing anything else with my life."

Nor can he imagine doing it anywhere but at Mission, working in offices that are now located on land where he grew up and rode his bike as a kid. He spent his childhood in the neighborhood near the hospital before heading east for his medical training.

"Providence Mission is unique in this area—it's more specialized than most centers," Dr. Tocci says. "We treat complex cases that typically are seen at academic medical centers. Our orthopedic institute offers the full breadth of care, from injuries seen in our trauma center to the most complex care involving multiple specialties—everything is coordinated from beginning to end. Our team is amazingly skilled and really good at caring for people."

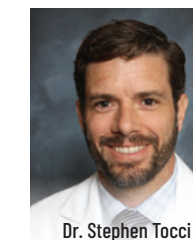
The Mission orthopedics program is ranked No. 34 in the country by *U.S. News & World Report*.

Richardson, 66 and retired from the accounting business, now lives in Santa Barbara. With her ankle healing nicely, she's looking forward to traveling in the RV she and her husband bought during the pandemic. She hopes to get back into some light hiking and maybe even kayaking.

But there's still a little more distance to travel down the road to recovery for her fused ankle. She continues to follow up with Dr. Tocci, sometimes scheduling Zoom visits and sometimes making the trip to Orange County, where she squeezes in visits with her grandson and friends.

"Dr. Tocci's dedication and knowledge make the drive worthwhile," she says. ●

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Dr. Stephen Tocci

