

# Ed Lazowska, SPINE PATIENT



**E**d Lazowska of Seattle had always been the picture of good health. So when he noticed a slight ache in his back in July 2007 during his daily bike ride to work, he thought it was only a few sore muscles and nothing more.

Lazowska and his wife left the next day for Maine on their annual summer vacation but instead of enjoying 10 days of wind surfing as usual, he spent the trip sitting in a chair on an ice pack. It was the only thing that eased his back pain, which had grown much more severe.

UW Medicine spine specialists ran tests on Lazowska and diagnosed an infection in his spine. They prescribed antibiotics, which at first seemed to be helping, and scheduled additional tests at the UW Medicine Spine Center at Harborview. By then, the antibiotics that had been keeping the infection in check had run their course. The infection began to spread, and the pain became excruciating. Lazowska could barely walk when he arrived at Harborview for his appointment.

He was admitted on the spot and began aggressive treatment led by Dr. Jens Chapman, director of the spine service at Harborview, for a life-threatening infection in his spine. Only two weeks had passed since Lazowska had begun feeling those first aches.

“In my mind, I have always been completely healthy,” said Lazowska, the Bill & Melinda Gates Chair of Computer Science & Engineering at the University of Washington. “What started as a back ache left me completely incapacitated in a matter of days. Dr. Chapman gave me my life back.”

By seeking help from UW Medicine spine specialists, Lazowska was able to get innovative care from a multidisciplinary team of experts all working together in one system to make sure he received the best and most efficient treatment possible. Access to this team approach probably saved Lazowska’s life, Chapman said.

“Ed was in perfect health and an exemplary example of a person leading a prudent lifestyle, so we normally wouldn’t have expected this type of infection,” said Chapman, who is also a UW professor of Orthopedics and Sports Medicine and Neurological Surgery. “It was helpful to have a strong team working closely together, and luckily, we were able to catch the infection early.”

Spine infections with no known cause in otherwise healthy people, such as the one Lazowska suffered, are becoming increasingly common, Chapman said.

“We have been seeing far greater incidences of spine infections for no particular reason, but fortunately the majority of cases still respond to reasonable health-care measures,” he said. “Still, it’s important for people to take precautions, such as staying active and exercising, and to note the timing and severity of back aches. If aches fail to resolve or if medications fail to provide the intended relief, seek care promptly.”

During the first of Lazowska’s two surgeries, Chapman discovered an abscess pressing on the nerves in Lazowska’s back and eating away a disc and bone in one of his vertebrae. Chapman removed the abscess and inserted antibiotic beads to help fight the infection. A couple of weeks later, he operated on Lazowska again to remove the beads, which had done their job, and to repair the damage caused by the infection.

The surgeries were successful and, during the next few months, Lazowska began to return to his normal self.

As a patient at Harborview, Lazowska said he received expert care but perhaps the most extraordinary part of the experience was seeing how employees at every level, not just those providing direct patient care, took pride in patients doing well.



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Today, Lazowska is once again the picture of health and has returned to most of his daily activities, including biking to work.

“Under the circumstances, it was the best experience imaginable,” Lazowska said. “It is incredibly beneficial to have a resource like UW Medicine in the community, available to everyone.”