

Courageous Tribal members tell their story of struggle, pain and change.

For those reasons, the process of actually getting approval for gastric bypass surgery is a lengthy one. Clients undergo consultations, which includes them proving that they have exhausted all other options, seeking insurance approval (a very touchy subject) and undergoing analysis to determine whether their condition is actually life threatening. The last two parts are often intertwined.

Insurance, in fact, remains a sore issue for Flannagan.

"Insurance companies always turn it down," he said rather angrily.

When an insurance company does not approve a patient, Flannagan said, they could appeal it. Unfortunately, as no federal regulations exist concerning how insurance companies can regard obesity, that appeal process is often through the company again, resulting usually in another rejection. In addition, many insurance companies specifically exclude weight-loss surgery from their coverage plans.

Flannagan suspects that medical insurance is propelled often by the financial interest of the company. The one time cost of \$15,000 plus that the surgery usually costs is vastly outweighed by the fact that many obese people are paying up to \$500 per month in insurance premiums just to cover the cost of their medications. The demands that companies set in order to cover bariatric surgery are what Flannagan calls "a high-jump bar."

"It's a pathetic situation," he said disgustedly.

But it is a situation that Flannagan is crusading to change. Every year he and other fellow bariatric surgeons travel to Washington, D.C., "politicking," as he says, to get legislature passed that will put an end to insurance self-regulation. Their trips are funded out of their own pockets.

Flannagan sees bariatric surgery, especially gastric bypass, not solely as a remedy for weight-loss, but as a cure for obesity related diseases and a preventive measure.

"We've been tracking our results for more than 15 years, since June of 1982," he said. "Our records show the surgery holds up."

Not only do most patients maintain their weight-loss, he said, many of the related illnesses disappear.

"In our diabetic patients, diabetes goes away 95 percent of the time," he said. "Hypertension goes away 80 percent of the time."

"We return people to good health," he said. "They are reborn."

Shelley Hanson would agree.

"I'm definitely more confident now," she said.

And that confidence shows. Although the financial burden of undergoing the surgery forced her to close down her plus-size clothing store in Salem, Hanson regrets little, and embraces a lot of the new changes.

"I have a new boyfriend," she said, smiling. "Dating is certainly not something I ever imagined I'd be doing again."

"I just feel great!"

But to be fair, Hanson said, it wasn't easy. As she nears the one-year mark of the newest chapter in her life, in hindsight she can say it was anything but easy.

"The first year has been a real roller-coaster ride," she said.

Actually, two years if you count the year she spent on Dr. Flannagan's waiting list and getting screened. But life following the operation, she said, is a virtual shock.

"The physical change," she paused. "It triggers so much mental and social anxiety."

Hanson struggled with depression, no longer able to turn to food for emotional support. But she found solace in the monthly gastric bypass support group offered by Dr. Flannagan.

"It was hard emotionally," Hanson said. "This is a major life change."

Dr. Flannagan contends that there are many "individual variations of attitude" following the surgery. Post-op life will be vastly different for everybody.

Complications from the surgery are minimal, five percent of the time. And Dr. Flannagan is fast approaching the 1,000 patient mark, with a waiting list six months long.

"We definitely need more bariatric surgeons," he said, observing that he only performs maybe four operations per week.

The Tribe's own Dr. James Molloy offers his endorsement of the surgery.

"I'm a proponent of any therapy that is proven to work," he said. "And this surgery seems to work extremely well."

He adds that Native Americans are at a particular risk for obesity, often having rates from two to ten times that of other races. But even though he defines gastric bypass as "phenomenal" for weight-loss, Molloy still offers a word of caution.

"People should exhaust all avenues before attempting GBS (gastric bypass surgery)," he said.

Tribal member Marilyn Porter offers testament to that.

"If there is any other way to lose weight," she said. "Go that direction. This is a simply drastic change."

Like Hanson, Porter has struggled with her weight for the greater part of her existence. She was teased as a child, a regularity she said that has made her very shy and introverted.

"I've had to force myself to be normal," she said.

Porter attributes her low self-esteem to obesity. And throughout her life she has found salvation in eating.

"Food was my lover, my friend, my companion," she said. "It fulfilled every emotional need I couldn't get anywhere else."

Strangely enough though, Porter is also one of the few people who is simply obese. In other words, she hasn't gained any of the other undesirable conditions of obesity, like diabetes or heart disease.

"I am completely healthy," she said. "And for that reason I had to switch insurance companies to pay for the surgery."

Porter sought the surgery because she had reached the landmark age of 40, the year she claims "things start to break down." The disintegrated cartilage in her knee is a good example, and has also posed a major complication since her surgery on August 16. Having to take up an exercise regimen has been "painful," yet Porter recognizes the necessity. But recognizing and accepting the new lifestyle are two different species.

"They do the surgery on your body," she said. "But they don't do it on your brain. 'The first three months my head was just screaming 'you need to eat! You need to eat!'"

Porter not only attends the support group, but she is undergoing therapy as well. And it almost isn't enough, she said. Yet like Hanson, Porter has no regrets about gastric bypass.

"I can't say I'd do it again... at this point," she said. "But I'm glad I did it."

Porter has dropped 67 pounds since the surgery. Not bad, really, and interesting considering Porter confesses she hasn't stuck to the post-op regimen that well.

"I know I can do it," she said. "Some people breeze through it, some don't."

Evidently, Tribal member Janell Haller is one of those people who did.

"Well, some days I felt like crap," said Haller, who



Photo courtesy of Shelley Hanson

PERSONAL MIRACLE — Shelley Hanson and other Grand Ronde Tribal members have found hope in a relatively unknown surgery that may have saved their lives. "It's a miracle," said Hanson of her new body and healthy lifestyle. The surgeon who performed the surgery on Hanson and others will be in Grand Ronde in early January for an open forum and discussion of the risks and benefits of gastric bypass surgery.

had gastric bypass surgery May 17. "But over all, I've haven't had all that tough a time with it."

The surgery was more of a must for Haller, who at the same time had surgery for chronic gall bladder problems. She had gone up and down for most of her life, but sailed through some particularly rough waters when her father, Pete Grout, died in February of 1998. He died from diabetes at 67 years old.

"After my dad died, I gained 80 pounds," she said. "Food filled a void for me."

She also realized that at the age of 45, some changes were in order, for the sake of her daughter.

"I did it for Cody," Haller says. "I want to see my grandkids."

Her weight has gone down and she feels great.

"To know this is final is wonderful," she said. "I don't have to live with the fear of putting it (weight) back on."

Haller believes that Native Americans have been hit the hardest by obesity compared to other ethnic groups. And she despises the stigma that invariably falls upon them.

"The perception that fat people are heavy because they're lazy..." she shakes her head in contempt. "It pushes people into the wrong environment, it lowers their self-esteem."

And Haller has little doubts that obese people are discriminated against. But she, like others, is convinced that redemption is on its way, and that a new day is dawning.

"At our support group, we had Marilyn Porter," she said. "And to be honest, that was the first time I'd ever seen her smile...and she has smiled a lot since then."

Haller grinned, and nodded her head.

"You could see hope in her eyes."

Gastric Bypass Support Group

Friday, January 5 from 6-8 p.m.

Tribal Community Center

Dr. Flannagan and his assistants will be in Grand Ronde to attend this Gastric Bypass Support Group meeting.

For more information on Gastric Bypass Surgery:

■ **Shelley Hanson**

503 879-3737 or e-mail: shanson@wvi.com

■ **Oregon Center for Bariatric Surgery**

655 E. Eleventh Ave., Eugene, Oregon 97401
541-687-1445 or www.oregoncenter.com