

It's too risky, they told her. Your health isn't good enough, she was cautioned.

Doctor after doctor pointed to her age and bad heart and told Mary Robison that surgery wasn't an option.

But Robison was not ready to spend the rest of her life in a wheelchair, paralyzed from the waist down.

First, a short medical lesson.

Robison, 70, has osteoporosis.

Sometimes, when the bones of the spine, the vertebrae, become weakened, they can collapse.

That usually results in a compression fracture. That condition is painful. It can change the way a person lives, but it is not necessarily a dramatic injury.

Osteoporosis can, however, also result in something far more traumatic. A burst fracture is when one of the vertebra is crushed in all directions.

The bony margins of the vertebra can bump into the spinal cord and cause paralysis.

Now, back to our story.

In March, Robison had a burst fracture and lost the use of her legs.

There is a surgery that can fix the problem, but it is a difficult and dangerous procedure that can mean eight hours on the operating table.

Every doctor Robison went to said that because of her age and the fact that she had a pacemaker, she was not a good candidate for the surgery. It would simply be too much for her to handle.

But Robison is tougher than she looks. "I wanted to get back to playing the piano at my church," she said.



JOHN FAHERTY / THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

Last week, Dr. Jacob Amrani performed back surgery on 70-year-old Mary Robison, who suffered from osteoporosis. Amrani, a physician at John C. Lincoln-Deer Valley, predicts his patient will be walking again in three months.

Finally, she went to see Dr. Jacob Amrani, an orthopedic surgeon who specializes in spinal surgery.

It was Robison's toughness that caught Amrani's eye.

"I was looking at a motivated patient who wanted her life back," Amrani said. "She was willing to work. She wasn't brought in by her family and they said, 'Operate.' She wanted this."

Last week, Amrani operated on Robison at John C. Lincoln Hospital-Deer Valley using a technique that poses fewer risks for post-operative complications.

He pulled out the burst

vertebra and inserted a bone donated for transplant. He then inserted two rods and six screws to help hold it all together.

After all that, the doctor told his patient it would be six months to a year before she would be able to walk again.

The recovery process is slow and painful, involving lots of therapy and hard work.

But almost immediately, Robison proved to Amrani that his instincts about her toughness were correct.

She started moving her toes for the first time in six

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months.

Wednesday afternoon, she was sitting up for the first time since the surgery.

"Here I sit," she said.

"How does that feel?" he asked her.

"It feels good," she said with a smile. "But it's going to feel good to get back in bed,

too."

Robison was continuing to move her toes. She was also able to swing her legs back and forth while seated.

Amrani now says he thinks she may be walking again in three months. Playing the church piano should come shortly after that.