‘Vaginal mesh left us in agony’

Two women who’ve had the medical procedure that’s caused untold suffering tell how it ruined their health, too…

A hassle-free 20-minute operation. That’s what the 10,000 women in the UK who are fitted with vaginal mesh devices to fix stress incontinence and prolapse every year are promised. But last month, the BBC’s Panorama revealed the plastic mesh fitted into millions of women globally over the past 20 years could be far riskier than it was made out to be. Complications reported by thousands of patients include chronic pain, infection issues and organ damage. In November, Chrissy Brajic from Toronto, Canada, died aged 42 from sopsis triggered by a mesh device fitted for incontinence following childbirth. And last month, New Zealand banned the use of mesh devices in all operations until they are declared safe. Here, news speaks to two women gravely affected by the implant…

‘IT FELT LIKE I’D BEEN KICKED IN MY PRIVATES’

Paula Lynn, 38, a civil servant from Belfast, is mum to Dylan, 20, and Morgan, 14. She had a mesh sling fitted in 2011 after battling incontinence for years, but now suffers countless side effects…

Every morning it’s a struggle. Making the short journey to the bathroom before being helped into the shower by my daughter Morgan, 14, leaves me in agony. “Don’t worry, Mum,” she says. “It’s just a few minutes.”

It radiated up my legs to my tummy, pelvis, bladder, vagina and lower back. I had permanent period-like pain and felt like a horse had kicked me hard in my lower region. I told the pain should subside, but it didn’t.

She’s had surgery fast, as has my son Dylan. As a single mum, I’ve had no choice but to rely on their help.

The bladder problems led to all my life escalating when I had undergone surgery to fit a mesh, which was deemed inappropriate. The mesh was cut and left to heal. After splitting from my partner a year later, I lost all my confidence, gained weight and couldn’t even contemplate dating.

I tried various treatments - pelvic physio and acupuncture - but nothing worked. The mesh was cut as “the Holy Grail” - no more leaks and it would take just 20 minutes. In 2011, as I was being wheeled in for the operation, I asked the surgeon if she had fitted a mesh under my urethra to support my bladder. I claimed I was suffering from intermittent urgency and was hoping the mesh would stop the feeling.

But when I woke up from the anaesthetic my legs felt weak. When the feeling returned, the pain set in…

‘MY MESH LACERATED MY HUSBAND’S PENIS’

Mum-of-three Candia McCulloch, 43, is married to Ian, 45, a business analyst, and lives in Rugby, Warwickshire. She had mesh slings fitted unknowingly while undergoing a hysterectomy in France in 2008 and has been left in agony…

“I’ve fixed your prolapses,” said the surgeon when I woke up, groggy from anaesthetic, following my hysterectomy in 2008. ‘I don’t even know I had a prolapse, but in the hospital in Paris where I lived at the time, I assumed the doctor knew best.

Heavy rain was unbearable. I started in my stiletto, then radiated to my spine, legs, vagina and bladder.

At first I assumed I was suffering from the operation, which I’d have to deal with for years. But as the months went by, the pain was constant.

My vaginal and bladder wall were “too thick, too gross and too acid. I couldn’t go to the toilet without great difficulty and I had to hold it in.”

When I walked and sat down, I would feel pain like a knife through my private parts.

The times my husband Ian, 49, and I tried to be intimate, we both experienced like pains for weeks afterwards. Since then, he has been stranger to me physically, which has been a huge blow.

I felt my fear had been taken away. The years went by and I resigned myself to a life of three diseases.

In January 2014, after a small prag in my car, I felt my mesh cutting through my rectum. ‘I’ve never felt pain like it. I just couldn’t move. I was in agony，“ said Ian. I was in the bath, washing my private parts.

In February 2015, I had just finished a walk with Ian. I was feeling weak and I couldn’t get up. He finally moved back in with me. The surgeon wouldn’t admit it, but he just couldn’t see me go through it alone.

Feeling certain there was something stuck inside me, I took shots of the area to check if anything was visible. It always looked angry and inflamed. One day, I noticed something sticking out, like a piece of plastic.

A gynaecologist examined me and they could see my mesh too. But with every single touch, I felt my insides were being grated.

Eventually, MRI revealed mesh on my sacral joint, between my bowel and vagina, the neck of my bladder and my upper lumbar. Why the surgeon wouldn’t admit it, I’ll never understand.

I now have the surgical notes to prove I had mesh slings fitted, even though I had written on my consent form that I have an allergy to certain plastics.

I am now on a waiting list for a full removal, but the damage has been done. I am physically injured as the devices have been there for nearly ten years, and my symptoms continue.

I have since set up the Mesh UK support group on Facebook to help other victims. Campaigning gets me through.

Visit Mesh UK on Facebook or SlingMesh Werner.com

Charlotte North

‘THOSE WHO HAVE COMPLICATIONS HAVE SUFFERED’

Ellis Dowers, a consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist based in London, tells us why surgical procedures may be a better option…

“A majority of women who have mesh fitted don’t experience problems, but those who have experienced complications have suffered. The medical device industry has largely withdrawn mesh products in the treatment of stress-vaginal prolapse but it is still used on the NHS.

“Pelvic floor exercises may help, but the ‘Goldilocks’ device launched last year, which is non-surgical, is a viable alternative. It stimulates to increase pelvic tone, releases an LED light and heats up to increase blood flow and has been successful in clinical trials.”

Elchin, the company which produces the mesh implants, told the BBC’s Panorama, “While we empathise with those who have experienced complications, the vast majority of women with pelvic mesh sees an improvement in their day-to-day lives. All surgical pelvic floor procedures — with and without mesh — come with the risk of developing complications.”