

# True Decisions Inc.

An Independent Review Organization  
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Notice of Independent Review Decision

**DATE OF REVIEW:** APRIL 14, 2008

**IRO CASE #:**

**DESCRIPTION OF THE SERVICE OR SERVICES IN DISPUTE**

Lumbar laminectomy, discectomy, arthrodesis w/ cages L4/5, L5/S1

**A DESCRIPTION OF THE QUALIFICATIONS FOR EACH PHYSICIAN OR OTHER HEALTH CARE PROVIDER WHO REVIEWED THE DECISION**

Doctor of Medicine (M.D.), Board Certified in Orthopaedic Surgery

**REVIEW OUTCOME**

Upon independent review the reviewer finds that the previous adverse determination/adverse determinations should be:

- Upheld (Agree)
- Overturned (Disagree)
- Partially Overturned (Agree in part/Disagree in part)

**INFORMATION PROVIDED TO THE IRO FOR REVIEW**

OD Guidelines  
7/06 thru 9/06  
8/15/07  
Denial Letters 3/20/08 and 3/27/08  
Literature No date  
Op-Report 3/9/07  
11/07 thru 3/08  
Three View Lumbar Spine 1/10/06  
MRI 4/10/06  
CT Scan Lumbar Spine 3/7/08  
Post Myelogram Lumbar CT 3/7/08  
Neuromuscular Diagnostic 9/18/07  
Neurodiagnostic Associates 8/28/07  
WC Interim Report 8/10/07 and 2/11/08  
Pre-Surgical Mental Health Interview 12/12/07

**PATIENT CLINICAL HISTORY [SUMMARY]:**

The patient has chronic L3 and L4 radiculopathy and L5/S1 instability that has failed extensive conservative care. Decompression and fusion at L2/3, L3/4, and L4-5 with instrumented arthrodesis at L5/S1 has been denied by the insurance company.

**ANALYSIS AND EXPLANATION OF THE DECISION INCLUDE CLINICAL BASIS, FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS USED TO SUPPORT THE DECISION.**

The patient has subjective low back and leg pain with corroborative evidence of nerve compression and instability per MRI. The insurance company's doctors opined that the requested surgery was not indicated and it was denied. The denial is upheld because decompression is indicated only at L3/4, L4-5, and L5/S1; and instrumented fusion is indicated only at L5/S1. Therefore, the entire request is denied.

Fusion (spinal)	Not recommended for patients who have less than six months of failed recommended conservative care unless there is objectively demonstrated severe structural instability and/or acute or progressive neurologic dysfunction, but recommended as an option for spinal fracture, dislocation, spondylolisthesis or frank neurogenic compromise, subject to the selection criteria outlined in the section below entitled, " <a href="#">Patient Selection Criteria for Lumbar Spinal Fusion</a> ," after 6 months of conservative care. For workers' comp populations, see also the heading, " <a href="#">Lumbar fusion in workers' comp patients</a> ." After screening for psychosocial variables, outcomes are improved and fusion may be recommended for degenerative disc disease with spinal segment collapse with or without neurologic compromise after 6 months of compliance with recommended <a href="#">conservative therapy</a> . [For spinal instability criteria, see AMA Guides ( <a href="#">Andersson, 2000</a> )] For complete references, see separate document with all studies focusing on <a href="#">Fusion (spinal)</a> . There is limited scientific evidence about the long-term effectiveness of fusion for degenerative disc disease compared with natural history, placebo, or conservative treatment. Studies conducted in order to compare different surgical techniques have shown success for fusion in carefully selected patients. ( <a href="#">Gibson-Cochrane, 2000</a> ) ( <a href="#">Savolainen, 1998</a> ) ( <a href="#">Wetzel, 2001</a> ) ( <a href="#">Molinari, 2001</a> ) ( <a href="#">Bigos, 1999</a> ) ( <a href="#">Washington, 1995</a> ) ( <a href="#">DeBarard-Spine, 2001</a> ) ( <a href="#">Fritzell-Spine, 2001</a> ) ( <a href="#">Fritzell-Spine, 2002</a> ) ( <a href="#">Deyo-NEJM, 2004</a> ) ( <a href="#">Gibson-Cochrane/Spine, 2005</a> ) ( <a href="#">Soegaard, 2005</a> ) ( <a href="#">Glassman, 2006</a> ) ( <a href="#">Atlas, 2006</a> ) According to the recently released AANS/NASS Guidelines, lumbar fusion is recommended as a treatment for carefully selected patients with disabling low back pain due to one- or two-level degenerative disc disease after failure of an appropriate period of conservative care. This recommendation was based on one study that contained numerous flaws, including a lack of standardization of conservative care in the control group. At the time of the 2-year follow up it appeared that pain had significantly increased in the surgical group from year 1 to 2. Follow-up post study is still pending publication. In addition, there remains no direction regarding how to define the "carefully selected patient." ( <a href="#">Resnick, 2005</a> ) ( <a href="#">Fritzell, 2004</a> ) A recently published well respected international guideline, the "European Guidelines," concluded that fusion surgery for nonspecific chronic LBP cannot be recommended unless 2 years of all other recommended
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conservative treatments – including multidisciplinary approaches with combined programs of cognitive intervention and exercises – have failed, or such combined programs are not available, and only then in carefully selected patients with maximum 2-level degenerative disc disease. ([Airaksinen, 2006](#)) For chronic LBP, exercise and cognitive intervention may be equivalent to lumbar fusion without the potentially high surgical complication rates. ([Ivar Brox-Spine, 2003](#)) ([Keller-Spine, 2004](#)) ([Fairbank-BMJ, 2005](#)) ([Brox, 2006](#)) In acute spinal cord injury (SCI), if the spine is unstable following injury, surgical fusion and bracing may be necessary. ([Bagnall-Cochrane, 2004](#)) ([Siebenga, 2006](#)) A study on improving quality through identifying inappropriate care found that use of guideline-based Utilization Review (UR) protocols resulted in a denial rate for lumbar fusion 59 times as high as denial rates using non-guideline based UR. ([Wickizer, 2004](#)) The profit motive and market medicine have had a significant impact on clinical practice and research in the field of spine surgery. ([Weiner-Spine, 2004](#)) ([Shah-Spine, 2005](#)) ([Abelson, 2006](#)) Data on geographic variations in medical procedure rates suggest that there is significant variability in spine fusion rates, which may be interpreted to suggest a poor professional consensus on the appropriate indications for performing spinal fusion. ([Devo-Spine, 2005](#)) ([Weinstein, 2006](#)) Outcomes from complicated surgical fusion techniques (with internal fixation) may be no better than the traditional posterolateral fusion. ([van Tulder, 2006](#)) ([Maghout-Juratli, 2006](#)) Despite the new technologies, reoperation rates after lumbar fusion have become higher. ([Martin, 2007](#)) According to the recent Medicare Coverage Advisory Committee Technology Assessment, the evidence for lumbar spinal fusion does not conclusively demonstrate short-term or long-term benefits compared with nonsurgical treatment for elderly patients. ([CMS, 2006](#)) When lumbar fusion surgery is performed, either with lateral fusion alone or with interbody fusion, unlike cervical fusion, there is no absolute contraindication to patients returning even to contact sports after complete recovery from surgery. Like patients with a thoracic injury, those with a lumbar injury should be pain free, have no disabling neurological deficit, and exhibit evidence of bone fusion on x-ray films before returning. ([Burnett, 2006](#)) A recent randomized controlled trial comparing decompression with decompression and instrumented fusion in patients with foraminal stenosis and single-level degenerative disease found that patients universally improved with surgery, and this improvement was maintained at 5 years. However, no obvious additional benefit was noted by combining decompression with an instrumented fusion. ([Hallett, 2007](#)) Discography may be supported if the decision has already been made to do a spinal fusion, and a negative discogram could rule out the need for fusion on that disc (but a positive discogram in itself would not justify fusion). Discography may help distinguish asymptomatic discs among morphologically abnormal discs in patients without psychosocial issues. Precise prospective categorization of discographic diagnoses may predict outcomes from treatment, surgical or otherwise. ([Derby, 2005](#)) ([Derby2, 2005](#)) ([Derby, 1999](#)) New research shows that healthcare expenditures for back and neck problems have increased substantially over time, but with little improvement in healthcare outcomes such as functional disability and work limitations. Rates of imaging, injections, opiate use, and spinal surgery have increased substantially over the past decade, but it is unclear what impact, if any, this has had on health outcomes. ([Martin, 2008](#)) Lumbar spinal fusion surgeries use bone grafts, and are sometimes combined with metal devices, to produce a rigid connection between two or more adjacent vertebrae. The therapeutic objective of spinal fusion surgery for patients with low back problems is to prevent any movement

in the intervertebral spaces between the fused vertebrae, thereby reducing pain and any neurological deficits. See also [Adjacent segment disease/degeneration](#) (fusion) & [Iliac crest donor-site pain treatment](#).

*Lumbar fusion in workers' comp patients:* In cases of workers' compensation, patient outcomes related to fusion may have other confounding variables that may affect overall success of the procedure, which should be considered. Until further research is conducted there remains insufficient evidence to recommend fusion for chronic low back pain in the absence of stenosis and spondylolisthesis, and this treatment for this condition remains "under study." It appears that workers' compensation populations require particular scrutiny when being considered for fusion for chronic low back pain, as there is evidence of poorer outcomes in subgroups of patients who were receiving compensation or involved in litigation. ([Fritzell-Spine, 2001](#)) ([Harris-JAMA, 2005](#)) ([Maghout-Juratli, 2006](#)) ([Atlas, 2006](#)) Despite poorer outcomes in workers' compensation patients, utilization is much higher in this population than in group health. ([Texas, 2001](#)) ([NCCI, 2006](#)) Presurgical biopsychosocial variables predict patient outcomes from lumbar fusion, which may help improve patient selection. Workers' compensation status, smoking, depression, and litigation were the most consistent presurgical predictors of poorer patient outcomes. Other predictors of poor results were number of prior low back operations, low household income, and older age. ([DeBerard-Spine, 2001](#)) ([DeBerard, 2003](#)) ([Deyo, 2005](#)) ([LaCaille, 2005](#)) ([Trief-Spine, 2006](#)) Obesity and litigation in workers' compensation cases predict high costs associated with interbody cage lumbar fusion. ([LaCaille, 2007](#)) A recent study of 725 workers' comp patients in Ohio who had lumbar fusion found only 6% were able to go back to work a year later, 27% needed another operation, and over 90% were in enough pain that they were still taking narcotics at follow-up. ([Nguyen, 2007](#))

*Lumbar fusion for spondylolisthesis:* Recommended as an option for spondylolisthesis. Patients with increased instability of the spine after surgical decompression at the level of degenerative spondylolisthesis are candidates for fusion. ([Eckman, 2005](#)) This study found only a 27% success from spinal fusion in patients with low back pain and a positive single-level low-pressure provocative discogram, versus a 72% success in patients having a well-accepted single-level lumbar pathology of unstable spondylolisthesis. ([Carragee, 2006](#)) Unilateral instrumentation used for the treatment of degenerative lumbar spondylolisthesis is as effective as bilateral instrumentation. ([Fernandez-Fairen, 2007](#)) Patients with degenerative spondylolisthesis and spinal stenosis who undergo standard decompressive laminectomy (with or without fusion) showed substantially greater improvement in pain and function during a period of 2 years than patients treated nonsurgically, according to the recent results from the Spine Patient Outcomes Research Trial (SPORT). ([Weinstein-spondylolisthesis, 2007](#)) ([Deyo-NEJM, 2007](#)) For degenerative lumbar spondylolisthesis, spinal fusion may lead to a better clinical outcome than decompression alone. No conclusion about the clinical benefit of instrumenting a spinal fusion can be made, but there is moderate evidence that the use of instrumentation improves the chance of achieving solid fusion. ([Martin, 2007](#)) A recent systematic review of randomized trials comparing lumbar fusion surgery to nonsurgical treatment of chronic back pain associated with lumbar disc degeneration, concluded that surgery may be more efficacious than unstructured nonsurgical care but may not be more efficacious than structured cognitive-behavior therapy. Methodological limitations of the randomized trials prevented firm conclusions. ([Mirza, 2007](#))

*Lumbar fusion for Scheuermann's kyphosis:* Recommended as an option

	<p>for adult patients with severe deformities (e.g. more than 70 degrees for thoracic kyphosis), neurological symptoms exist, and pain cannot be adequately resolved non-operatively (e.g. physical therapy, back exercises). Good outcomes have been found in a relatively large series of patients undergoing either combined anterior-posterior or posterior only fusion for Scheuermann's kyphosis. (<a href="#">Lonner, 2007</a>)</p> <p><b>Patient Selection Criteria for Lumbar Spinal Fusion:</b>  For chronic low back problems, fusion should not be considered within the first 6 months of symptoms, except for fracture, dislocation or progressive neurologic loss. Indications for spinal fusion may include: (1) Neural Arch Defect - Spondylolytic spondylolisthesis, congenital neural arch hypoplasia. (2) Segmental Instability (objectively demonstrable) - Excessive motion, as in degenerative spondylolisthesis, surgically induced segmental instability and mechanical intervertebral collapse of the motion segment and advanced degenerative changes after surgical disectomy. [For excessive motion criteria, see AMA Guides, 5th Edition, page 384 (relative angular motion greater than 20 degrees). (<a href="#">Andersson, 2000</a>) (<a href="#">Luers, 2007</a>)] (3) Primary Mechanical Back Pain (i.e., pain aggravated by physical activity)/Functional Spinal Unit Failure/Instability, including one or two level segmental failure with progressive degenerative changes, loss of height, disc loading capability. In cases of workers' compensation, patient outcomes related to fusion may have other confounding variables that may affect overall success of the procedure, which should be considered. There is a lack of support for fusion for mechanical low back pain for subjects with failure to participate effectively in active rehab pre-op, total disability over 6 months, active psych diagnosis, and narcotic dependence. [For spinal instability criteria, see AMA Guides, 5th Edition, page 379 (lumbar inter-segmental movement of more than 4.5 mm). (<a href="#">Andersson, 2000</a>)] (4) Revision Surgery for failed previous operation(s) if significant functional gains are anticipated. Revision surgery for purposes of pain relief must be approached with extreme caution due to the less than 50% success rate reported in medical literature. (5) Infection, Tumor, or Deformity of the lumbosacral spine that cause intractable pain, neurological deficit and/or functional disability. (6) After failure of two disectomies on the same disc, fusion may be an option at the time of the third disectomy, which should also meet the ODG criteria. (See <a href="#">ODG Indications for Surgery -- Disectomy.</a>)</p> <p><b>Pre-Operative Surgical Indications Recommended:</b> Pre-operative clinical surgical indications for spinal fusion should include all of the following: (1) All pain generators are identified and treated; &amp; (2) All physical medicine and manual therapy interventions are completed; &amp; (3) X-rays demonstrating spinal instability and/or myelogram, CT-myelogram, or discography (see <a href="#">discography criteria</a>) &amp; MRI demonstrating disc pathology; &amp; (4) Spine pathology limited to two levels; &amp; (5) <a href="#">Psychosocial screen</a> with confounding issues addressed. (6) For any potential fusion surgery, it is recommended that the injured worker refrain from smoking for at least six weeks prior to surgery and during the period of fusion healing. (<a href="#">Colorado, 2001</a>) (<a href="#">BlueCross BlueShield, 2002</a>)</p>
Laminectomy/laminotomy	<p>Recommended for lumbar spinal stenosis. For patients with lumbar spinal stenosis, surgery (standard posterior decompressive laminectomy alone, without disectomy) offered a significant advantage over nonsurgical treatment in terms of pain relief and functional improvement that was maintained at 2 years of follow-up, according to a new SPORT study. Disectomy should be reserved for those conditions of disc herniation causing radiculopathy. Laminectomy may be used for spinal stenosis secondary to degenerative processes exhibiting ligament</p>

	<p>hypertrophy, facet hypertrophy, and disc protrusion, in addition to anatomical derrangements of the spinal column such as tumor, trauma, etc. (<a href="#">Weinstein, 2008</a>) (<a href="#">Katz, 2008</a>) Laminectomy is a surgical procedure for treating spinal stenosis by relieving pressure on the spinal cord. The lamina of the vertebra is removed or trimmed to widen the spinal canal and create more space for the spinal nerves. See also <a href="#">Discectomy/laminectomy</a> for surgical indications, with the exception of confirming the presence of radiculopathy.</p>
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**A DESCRIPTION AND THE SOURCE OF THE SCREENING CRITERIA OR OTHER CLINICAL BASIS USED TO MAKE THE DECISION:**

- ACOEM- AMERICAN COLLEGE OF OCCUPATIONAL & ENVIRONMENTAL MEDICINE UM KNOWLEDGEBASE
- AHCPR- AGENCY FOR HEALTHCARE RESEARCH & QUALITY GUIDELINES
- DWC- DIVISION OF WORKERS COMPENSATION POLICIES OR GUIDELINES
- EUROPEAN GUIDELINES FOR MANAGEMENT OF CHRONIC LOW BACK PAIN
- INTERQUAL CRITERIA
- MEDICAL JUDGEMENT, CLINICAL EXPERIENCE AND EXPERTISE IN ACCORDANCE WITH ACCEPTED MEDICAL STANDARDS
- MERCY CENTER CONSENSUS CONFERENCE GUIDELINES
- MILLIMAN CARE GUIDELINES
- ODG- OFFICIAL DISABILITY GUIDELINES & TREATMENT GUIDELINES
- PRESSLEY REED, THE MEDICAL DISABILITY ADVISOR
- TEXAS GUIDELINES FOR CHIROPRACTIC QUALITY ASSURANCE & PRACTICE PARAMETERS
- TEXAS TACADA GUIDELINES
- TMF SCREENING CRITERIA MANUAL

- PEER REVIEWED NATIONALLY ACCEPTED MEDICAL LITERATURE  
(PROVIDE A DESCRIPTION)**
  
- OTHER EVIDENCE BASED, SCIENTIFICALLY VALID, OUTCOME  
FOCUSED GUIDELINES (PROVIDE A DESCRIPTION)**