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## Resident goes robot route for vasectomy reversal

By **DIANE CHUN**  
Sun staff writer

When Gainesville residents Briton Jon and Karen Rice married last November, they decided they wanted kids.

B.J., 43, is director of programming for radio station WKZY in Gainesville and this is his second marriage. He has two children from his earlier marriage.

"I thought I was through with all that," he said. "Then I met Karen and things changed."

Karen Rice, 35, is a vice president with Meridian Behavioral Healthcare and the marriage is her first.

Their story isn't much different from thousands of other couples who seek to start a blended family. But to do that, the Rices would have to undo the vasectomy that B.J. had undergone eight years earlier, when he'd thought his family was complete.

[Click here](#) for video.

Vasectomy reversal is traditionally done by a surgeon working under a microscope.

Instead, Rice chose to put his surgery in the "hands" of the da Vinci Type S robotic surgery system at Shands at the University of Florida.

For a procedure in which precision is crucial, the da Vinci system gave Dr. Sijo Parekattil, a University of Florida assistant professor of urology, the best possible shot at undoing B.J.'s earlier surgery.

The \$1.4 million system is designed for the most complex, minimally invasive surgeries. As the patient, B.J. was on the operating room table surrounded by four interactive robotic arms, an endoscopic camera and video system that transmitted high-resolution, 3-D images from inside his body.

Parekattil, who is fellowship-trained in robotic surgery, sat at a nearby console, where he could look through binocular-like lenses and manipulate the robotic arms with controls that responded to the slightest movements of fingers and wrist.

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Tracy Wilcox/The Gainesville Sun

Husband Briton Jon and wife Karen Rice pose for a photo in their home in northwest Gainesville. Briton Jon decided to have a vasectomy reversal and the treatment was done by a robot.

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It is a system that marries all his skills as a surgeon with the exacting precision of a robot.

About half a million men in the United States opt for a vasectomy every year, and 2 percent to 6 percent of them later decide to have the procedure reversed. This surgery reconnects the ducts that carry sperm from the testicles into the semen. When it is successful, it once again enables a man to get his partner pregnant.

B.J. and Karen's quest didn't begin in Parekattil's office, however. They were evaluated by Dr. R. Stan Williams, director of the UF College of Medicine's Division of Reproductive Endocrinology and Infertility. As treatments for infertility become more refined - and more frequently successful - both the man and woman in a relationship are evaluated.

It is, Williams said, a partnership and both must work together to achieve success.

Women, beginning about age 30, will lose about 8 percent of their fertility each year, Williams explained.

"So we need to examine the woman to assure that she still has a reasonable fertility potential before her partner has the reversal surgery."

Karen passed those tests. The couple then saw Parekattil.

"By the time we left the consultation, I had had a complete exam and he had the calendar out to set a date for surgery using the robot," B.J. said. "I remember walking out and thinking, 'Wait a minute, what just happened?'"

After talking it over, B.J. said, "we decided we were on board."

B.J.'s surgery took place at Shands UF on July 25, and within hours, he went home. His recovery will take about six weeks.

Parekattil said the surgery, which took more than seven hours, was "anything but a slam-dunk."

Besides the scar tissue from B.J.'s earlier surgery, Parekattil encountered a secondary blockage higher up in the epididymis, a coiled tube at the back of each testicle where the sperm matures. In B.J.'s case, both side were blocked.

To clear the blockages, Parekattil performed what he believes is the world's first robotic bilateral vasoepididymostomy. That's a big term for what the surgeon calls "one of the most difficult reversals I've ever done."

He puts the chances of success at 50 percent to 60 percent, because of its complexity.

"They'll have a good shot, if not an ideal situation," he said.

The cost of robotic reversal is about \$14,000, and as with many infertility treatments, it is not covered by insurance.

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"You can't put a price tag on having a child," B.J. said.  
"You have to go with your best option."

It will be three to six months before the couple can begin trying to conceive. Karen said there's a history of twins in her family, so she hopes that's a point in their favor.

The true measure of success, Karen said, will be if she can go home to visit family at Christmas and announce that she and B.J. are expecting.

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