

Docs remove fibroids via 2cm cut in navel

KKH's successful surgery last month spells shorter downtime for patients

By JUDITH TAN

SURGEONS here scored a first last month when they removed four large fibroids from a woman – through a cut in her navel no bigger than 2cm.

The operation to take out the non-cancerous growths from the uterus of the 46-year-old patient took two hours.

Because the incision was so small, the patient healed quickly from the operation, called a myomectomy.

She was on her feet the next day.

This was despite having had fibroids with a combined weight of 203g taken out of her. Some of the growths were as big as tennis balls.

The scar in her navel is practically invisible.

Traditionally, fibroids have been removed through conventional surgery, which can leave a 10cm-long scar below the bikini line, or keyhole surgery, which requires surgeons to make several 1cm-long cuts to create access for various surgical instruments.

But doing “single port” or single-cut surgery through the patient’s belly button presented two main challenges to the surgeons.

One is that manipulating the surgical tools through an incision that small takes more dexterity than is required in conventional keyhole surgery.

The other challenge comes from minimising bleeding after the fibroids are cut away and the surface of the uterus has to be repaired.

These challenges fell to Dr Ouek Swee Chong, who heads the Pre-Invasive Disease & Screening Unit and Dr Anthony Siow, Director of its Minimally Invasive Surgery Centre at KK Women’s & Children’s Hospital (KKH).

Dr Siow said that, to remove a fibroid, a surgeon has to pull it away from the uterine wall to expose the thin neck of tissue anchoring the fibroid to the uterus, so

it can be cut.

“With single-incision surgery, this pulling is no longer possible, as all instruments enter the tummy through the umbilicus,” he said.

The fibroids are cut up into smaller pieces while still in the patient and removed through the navel.

ONE-WAY CHALLENGE

“With single-incision surgery, this pulling (of the fibroid) is no longer possible, as all instruments enter the tummy through the umbilicus.”

Dr Anthony Siow, director of KKH’s Minimally Invasive Surgery Centre

The single-port myomectomy is done using specialised instruments just 5mm thick and a gel-surface port that holds the various instruments in place. A wound retractor clipped to the port keeps the incision open.

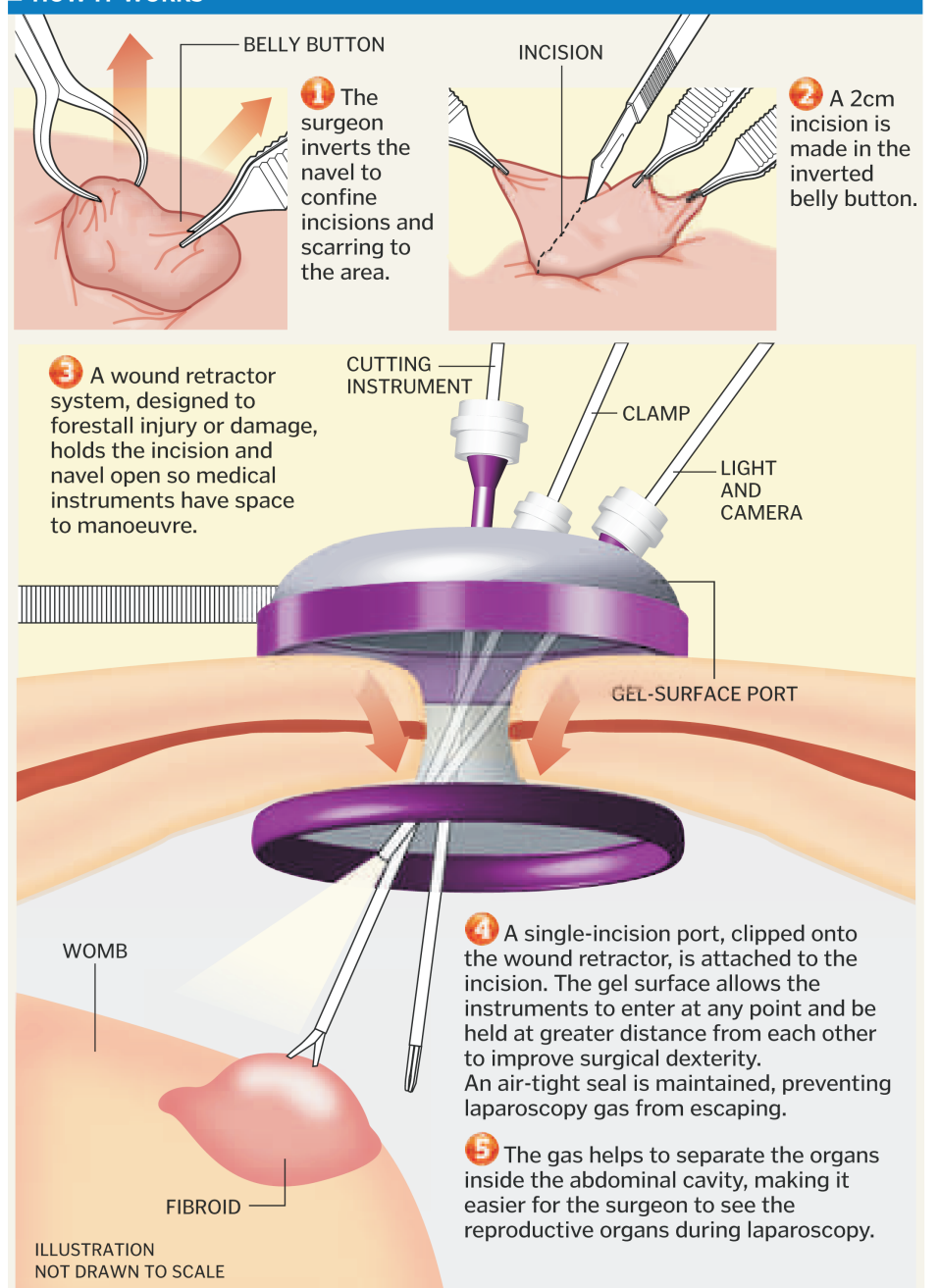
Dr Siow limits this minimally invasive surgery option to patients whose fibroids are smaller than a five-month-old pregnancy, that is, those weighing 800g or less.

Within a month of that first local ground-breaking operation on Aug 18, five more of such procedures were done at KKH.

Last year, 342 cases of fibroids were treated at KKH using conventional multi-incision keyhole surgery; another 326 patients underwent open surgery.

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HOW IT WORKS



‘No excruciating pain... and a quick recovery’

WHEN I came to after the two-hour operation to remove my fibroids, I felt none of the excruciating pain that I had been expecting.

Instead, I felt just a tad bruised in the lower abdomen – as though I had been pummelled in a kick-boxing tournament.

My surgeons from the KK Women’s and Children’s Hospital, Dr Ouek Swee

Chong and Dr Anthony Siow, had decided to remove my four tennis-ball-size fibroids through my navel, using only a single incision there.

This surgical method is the norm in Europe and in South Korea, but since I was the first person here to have it done, it made me Singapore’s Patient Zero.

The day after the operation, I was taught how to roll off the hospital bed to

minimise pain and injury, and encouraged to walk around the ward.

Apart from feeling a little bloated, I felt fine and was discharged from the hospital three days later.

Recovery was quick.

Stitches to the 2cm incision made in my belly button were removed a week later.

I have no scar to show for this experi-

ence, but to be on the safe side, the doctors extended my medical leave by a week and prescribed some anti-keloid cream.

Today is the 37th day since my operation and my second week back at work.

Driving is still out for me, as is carrying heavy bags, lest I strain my core muscles, but I am definitely feeling fine.

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