Dr. Lee Hieb, Lake City
She rehabilitates patients — and an old house

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LAKE CITY — When someone is suffering from a back problem, the last thing that sounds like fun is a long drive to the doctor.

For the past year, Dr. Lee Hieb, an orthopedic surgeon, has been able to help people closer to home at Stewart Memorial Community Hospital.

The Iowa native moved back to the state after running a private practice in Yuma, Ariz.

"This came about while I was in Arizona," Hieb said. "I wanted to come back to Iowa, and Michelle Davis (vice president of the hospital's clinics) came out to talk to me. They really wanted to get an orthopedic service going."

Hieb was ready to slow things down a bit. Running her practice in the underserved community of Yuma had her running ragged, she said. At one point she saw 19 cases in 36 hours. "I told them I wanted to work part time," Hieb said. "I'd been killing myself, and I'm getting a little older."

"They said OK," Hieb said. "I was like a doctor in a box," Hieb said. "It went very smoothly. I've never set up a whole program before. I'm telling you with in a couple of weeks, we were busy." Her fellowship was in spine surgery, which Davis told her wasn't going to be done in Lake City.

Instead, Hieb suggested a less-invasive technique be introduced to cure patients' spinal ailments. "I told her she might want to consider doing the minimally invasive things that really do help a certain population," Hieb said. "When I got here, we found out that no one in the area does anterolateral discectomy, infusions of which we do quite a few."

She said the cervical pain occurs when a disc isn't doing well in one's neck, causing pain to radiate down the patient's arm.

"People come in really miserable," Hieb said. "It's a degenerative disc disease. When I completed the program in Arizona, I did them as outpatient, but we don't do that here simply because most of our patients are so rural I like to keep them overnight."

Kyphoplasty is another technique Hieb offers to the community to treat spinal fractures caused by osteoporosis. "They just get this horrible back pain, and they're on narcotics, and they're sick, and they just can't get over it," she said. "This treatment is a nice step."

But she also makes sure her patients and the community are educated about the benefits of supplements.

"I'm always telling people about vitamin D because it's a real anti-aging hormone and is hugely important for bones," Hieb said. "A lot what we call osteoporosis is actually adultrickets."

She said she recommends people take 10,000 international units of vitamin D daily. "If your in the top level of vitamin D, you're in the bone clinic," Hieb said. "At this level, you have vitamin D levels, a lot of cancer risk is lowered."

Besides caring for people's health, Hieb is caring for the community's health by restoring an 185-year-old Victorian house.

"My big contribution to this community is that I've taken this 100-year-old horrible rundown house that I'm rehabbing," Hieb said. "I'm getting it."

She said the house has less than area than her office, but it didn't pass up the offer. "No one loved this house," she said. "I bought it for a song, $6,500. It was just that no one would buy the house. The house itself was sound, but they put on all these terrible additions that were terribly built and creepy made. It was glasst-ly what they did, so I tore all those off, and I just hired a high school kid to help me knock down the walls."

And she lives in the rubble. Her bed sits in the dining room, and she only has a toilet.

"I had a guy tear all the plumbing and take the old stuff out so I wouldn't have to deal with it right now," she said. "I left me a fitting for a hose, but it's inside the house. When the hospital's vice president's husband came over one night he saw me with the hose coming out of my front door as I watered my plants."

"All he could say was you might be a redneck," Hieb said with a laugh.

"It's been a lot of fun and really horrible living," Hieb said. "I think of that as one of my community services here. Honestly, I've put most of the community through working on this house. So many of my neighbors have come over and said, 'Thank God you bought that house.'"