

Firefighter Back to Work with Help of UC San Diego Medical Center Surgeon

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Jackie Carr

"Gary's hand was mangled," said Reid Abrams, M.D., chief of hand and microvascular surgery at UC San Diego Medical Center. "The first step was to clean the wound. The next was to consider reconstruction options that would keep him doing what he loves best as both a firefighter and carpenter."

Just over a year ago, Gary Whipple, a veteran firefighter for the San Diego Fire Department in Del Cerro, severely injured his hand at a neighbor's house with a table saw. The thumb and forefinger of his right hand were knocked into the blade causing a devastating injury to the hand's skin, tendons, arteries, joints, and bones.

"I was stunned. The accident happened so fast. It was over before I realized it," said Whipple. "It wasn't a good day but Dr. Abrams turned it around for me."

Every year, Abrams performs more than 500 orthopedic surgeries on patients throughout Southern California. Approximately 50 of these operations represent emergency cases like Whipple's, in which a hand, arm, or elbow must be reconstructed. Accidents range from car and motorcycle collisions to construction site injuries and home project mishaps.

In Whipple's case, his forefinger had been severed and his thumb cut lengthwise. Abrams identified multiple reconstruction options which included bone grafts from another part of Whipple's body or using his damaged index finger to repair and save the thumb.

"Every week, someone arrives at UC San Diego Medical Center facing significant life changes because of a split-second accident," said Abrams. "My role as a surgeon is to offer treatment options that deliver satisfying lifelong solutions. You decide what's viable and remove what's not. A finger that is painful, stiff, or with no feeling, may not be worth keeping."

Abrams consulted with Whipple to describe the long-term pros and cons of all procedures for his hand. After extensive discussion, it was decided that functionality was key to a meaningful and productive career as a firefighter.

"In Gary's case, a partial index finger would have been a liability, getting in the way of his other fingers. The index served the better purpose of rebuilding his thumb," said Abrams. "The thumb is the supreme digit, representing 40% of the hand's function. You need it for counter pressure. Think about cutting scissors, lifting a cup, or holding a fire hose."

In a second surgery, the remaining portion of Whipple's index finger was removed and used to rebuild his thumb. With a combination of physical therapy and the endless support of his fellow firefighters who kept him company and did chores around his house, Whipple healed quickly.

After six months of working day shifts, Whipple was back on the job and able to help fight the October 2007 fires. Recently, Whipple moved to Fire Station 11 in Golden Hill to work full time and has resumed complete use of his hand.

"Thanks to Dr. Abrams, I can totally do my job. Without his talent, I might not be here today," said Whipple. "For me, it's a miracle."

The department of orthopaedic surgery at UC San Diego Medical Center is dedicated to providing excellence in clinical care and research with cartilage restoration and transplantation, joint replacement, foot and ankle, and hand and upper extremity surgery, acute or subacute trauma care, and spine surgery.

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