



Doctors perform first hand transplant in DOD

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3/3/2010 - **LACKLAND AIR FORCE BASE (AFNS)** -- A team of military and civilian doctors performed the first-ever female hand transplant in the U.S. Feb. 17 at Wilford Hall Medical Center here.

Retired Master Sgt. Janet McWilliams is the 10th person in the U.S. to undergo this procedure and the first to have it done in a Department of Defense facility.

Almost nine years ago, the former first sergeant of Lackland AFB's 342nd Training Squadron, lost her left hand and her right hand was severely injured when a package bomb exploded in her office.

After years of surgical reconstruction and failed attempts to find a suitable prosthesis for her left arm, doctors asked Sergeant McWilliams if she was willing to be put on a waiting list for a hand donor.

Since the incident, Sergeant McWilliams said she underwent more than 25 surgeries for her injuries, but when her doctor suggested a hand transplant, she didn't stop to think; she immediately said, "Yes." On Feb. 16, a hand donor was identified.

"I received a gift, a hand," she said. "In the back of my mind, I've always wanted to have a hand. This wonderful family gave me that gift. I'm so honored to have this hand."

In contrast to an organ donor, selecting a donor for a hand transplant recipient involves additional emphasis on matching skin tone color, gender and the size of the hand, said Dr. Joe Nespral, the director of Clinical Services at the Texas Organ Sharing Alliance.

Two weeks after the surgery, Sergeant McWilliams already experienced movement in her thumb and fingers, said Maj. (Dr.) Dmitry Tudor, who was part of the surgical transplantation team and is the chief of Hand and Upper Extremity Service at Wilford Hall. However, he said, it would take at least six months for her to regain any feeling in her new hand.

This transplant, Sergeant Williams said, is not only a significant occasion for her, but for all wounded warriors.

"I am hoping that I can open the door for other wounded warriors who are coming back from Iraq, Afghanistan and other areas of the world who've lost hands (or) arms," she said. "Hopefully this will provide hope for them as well as receiving something back that is absolutely priceless and that is our dignity."

Whenever she's in the hospital, Sergeant McWilliams dons a hospital gown with her former first sergeant rank and the patches of her former units. She said she hopes the news of this procedure gives wounded warriors another choice and helps them decide if this type of procedure is for them.

To date, no active-duty individuals have undergone this procedure, said Army Col. (Dr.) James Ficke, the chairman of Wilford Hall and Brooke Army Medical Center Integrated Departments of Orthopedics and Rehabilitation. There are about 50 wounded warriors who have an injury that may be eligible for this type of procedure. Along with Sergeant McWilliams, only one former Marine has received a hand transplant, but his procedure was done at a civilian facility.

Sergeant McWilliams faces months of occupational therapy, and in a years' time, Doctor Tudor said he hopes she will have enough function to perform daily activities.

"The journey is going to be rough; it's not going to be easy," she said. "There's nothing you can't do in life. 'No,' is not part of my vocabulary. This beautiful hand will certainly become a part of my body. Now, after all these years, I can finally wear that engagement ring again and my wedding band. It is just absolutely priceless."



Retired Master Sgt. Janet McWilliams became the first female to undergo a hand transplant Feb. 17, 2010, at the Wilford Hall Medical Center, Texas. She is the 10th person to undergo the procedure in the U.S. and the first to have it done at a Defense Department facility. (U.S. Air Force photo/Staff Sgt. Bennie J. Davis III)