

Doctors sew fingers onto torso

KELLY ANDREW

DARRYL MITCHELL feels squeamish when he looks down at his chest. The bony stubs of three fingers have been sewn just under the skin, attaching his injured hand to his torso.

The Palmerston North man's right hand was caught in machinery in an industrial accident on March 2. Two fingers were cut off, leaving stumps, and another two were left dangling from tendons yanked out by the force of the machine.

Mr Mitchell, 41, was flown to Hutt Hospital where he was told the fingers, which had been caught in his glove, were too badly damaged to reattach.

The skin had been peeled away, leaving three centimetres of exposed bone. Without tissue to cover the bone, the fingers would have to be shortened to just past the knuckle.

However, Hutt Hospital plastic surgeon Charles Davis opted for a rare surgical procedure whereby the finger bones are sewn underneath a thin layer of skin on the torso.

Mr Mitchell, a machine operator, was not keen at first on the idea of his hand being attached to his torso.

"But I put my faith in the doctors, they know what they're doing."

He admits that after the operation he was too horrified to look down at his torso for several days. "It's only this

week that I've started looking at it. It looks like my fingers have been slotted into my stomach."

He is being looked after at home by his wife and stepdaughter.

"It's been driving me nuts because I'm quite an active person. There is quite a bit of pain, but it's to be expected because the tendons were ripped right out from my arms."

Mr Davis said the procedure allowed a skin flap to form which could be used to cover the bone stub. In Mr Mitchell's case, it should mean his fingers will be about two-thirds of their original length — about 3cm from the knuckle.

"We thought if we could get some good skin to cover the bone there would be more useful function of the hand in the long term. You can't just put a skin graft on top of bare bone."

It will take at least a month before the skin covering Mr Mitchell's fingers will be supplied with blood from vessels in the hand, rather than the torso.

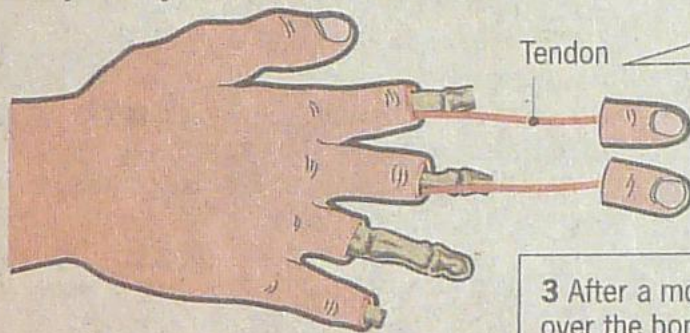
His little finger has not been placed under the torso skin, because there was not enough bone to work with.

Mr Davis said the "fiddly" technique was used about once a year at the hospital.

In two weeks, Mr Mitchell will return to Hutt Hospital where his fingers, with a new skin covering, will be separated from his torso.

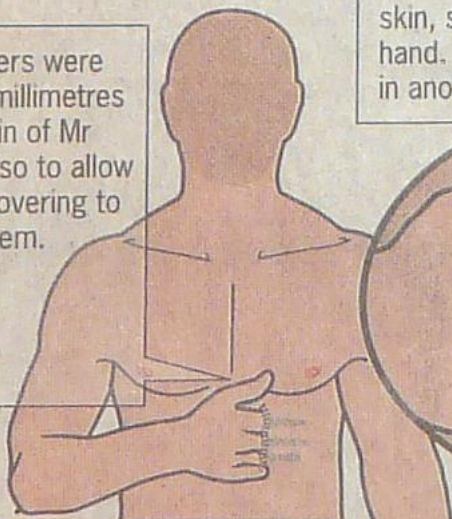
▶ SEVERED FINGERS

Palmerston North machine operator Darryl Mitchell damaged four fingers at work. Surgeons at Hutt Hospital could not reattach them to his hand because they were too badly damaged. They opted for a rare technique where three of the fingers were sewn under his skin to help a new layer of skin grow over them. Mr Mitchell's hand has been temporarily attached to his torso.

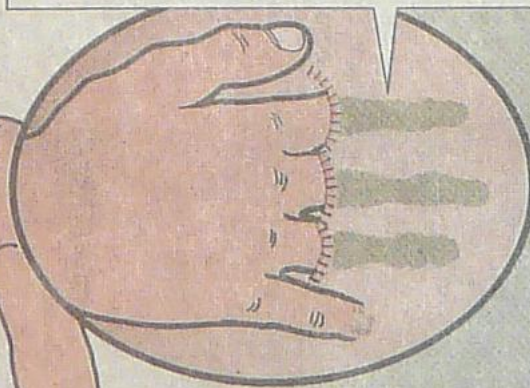


1 The machine amputated two fingers, leaving stumps, and the other two were dangling from the tendons.

2 Three fingers were sewn a few millimetres under the skin of Mr Mitchell's torso to allow a new skin covering to grow over them. The little finger was shortened.



3 After a month, the torso skin will grow over the bone ends and become finger skin, supplied by blood vessels in the hand. Then the fingers can be separated in another operation.



Source: CHARLES DAVIS, Wellington plastic surgeon

Graphic: DOMINION POST

