

Ear-bite victim safe — and sound

A doctor's microsurgery skills save a woman's ear after it was torn off in a dog attack.

by Angela Gregory

A woman whose ear was bitten off by a dog has had the torn flap reattached in a delicate four-hour operation using microscopic surgery.

It is understood to be only the third time in 20 years that an ear has been successfully reattached in New Zealand.

The woman was setting out to pay her last respects to her dead mother when she was attacked by a large dog outside a Mangere house.

Middlemore Hospital surgeon Dr Charles Davis said the 43-year-old was walking early on Saturday to her aunt's house, where her mother, who was to be buried that day, was lying in state.

Dr Davis said the woman, who did not want to be identified, heard a growling noise.

"She saw a large black dog rushing towards her and as she ran she tripped over. The dog leapt on top of her and bit off half her ear."

Dr Davis said the dog dropped the ear as it went to attack the woman's sister, scratching her face with its claws before running off.

After searching the area, members of the family found the ear, wrapped it in a cloth, and rushed the shocked woman to hospital.

Dr Davis said the ear was badly torn which made reattachment difficult.

"There were bite marks on the ear, although it was not badly chewed. I told her the chance of successfully reattaching her ear was slim."

Ears are extremely difficult to reattach as they have only a few tiny blood vessels.

But after a four-hour operation Dr Davis, who had not attempted an ear operation before, was able to claim success.

Using high-degree magnification, he discovered just one tiny blood vessel on the section of the ear which was ripped off.

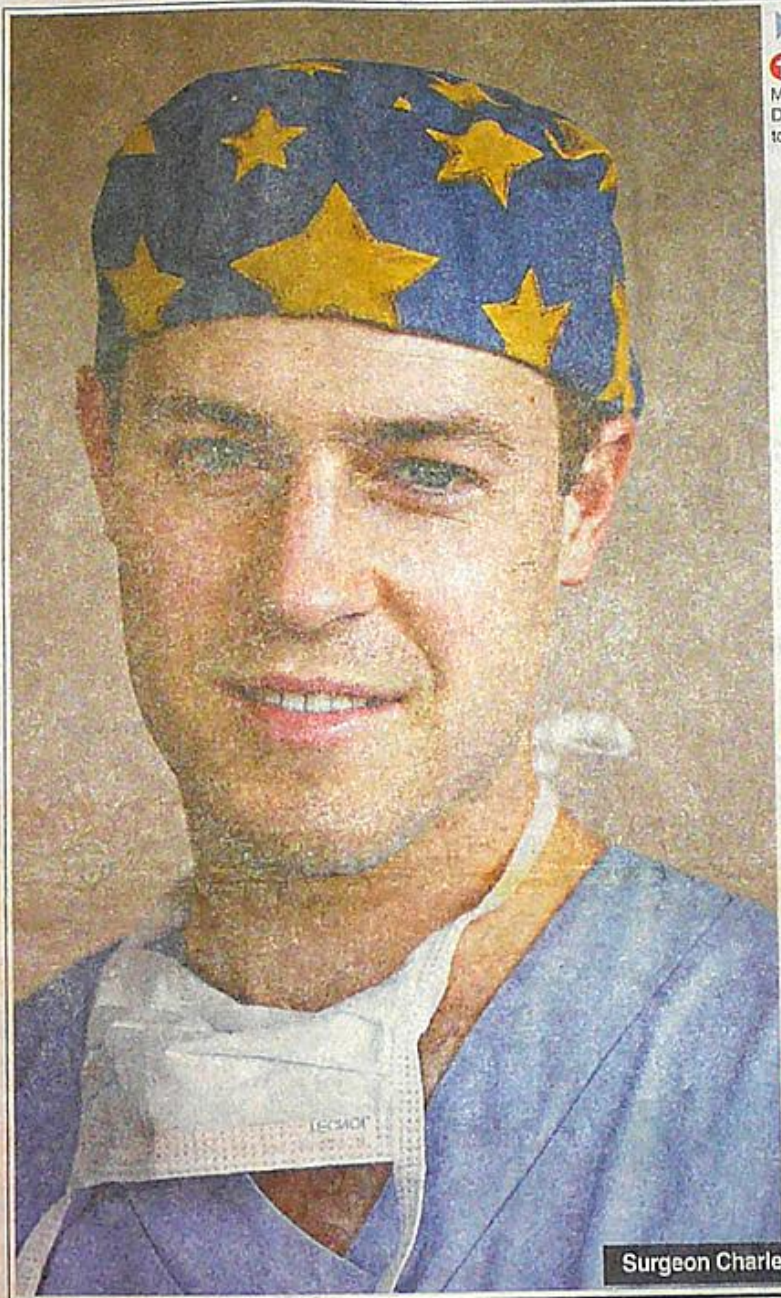
He stitched the ear flap to the scalp upside down to get the blood vessel close to an artery in the remaining ear stump.

Dr Davis then painstakingly joined the blood vessels under a microscope, using nylon thread finer than human hair.

"I then left it. I went and had a cup of tea for about quarter of an hour to make sure it worked."

Once Dr Davis confirmed blood was pumping back into the severed ear, he undid the temporary stitches and rotated the ear flap around the newly formed 0.2mm wide blood vessel, before stitching the ear back together.

Dr Davis said yesterday that the ear attachment was working beautifully and his patient was delighted.



Surgeon Charles Davis

"She is absolutely thrilled to have her ear."

Dr Davis was keeping the ear under a heat lamp to encourage the

blood flow, and the woman was taking blood thinning medication to stop clotting.

Because the blood could flow only one way into the ear through

the new vessel, a small stab wound was allowing it to drip out again until new veins grew to take the blood away.

Dr Davis said arteries and veins

would start reforming in a matter of days, and the woman would eventually regain feeling in the ear.

"All that will be different is the scar running right across it."

► Radical ear surgery

1 Middlemore Hospital, 9 am Saturday. Surgeon Charles Davis sees woman who has had half her ear torn off by a dog.



Dr Davis works under a microscope on the piece of ear to find a suitable blood vessel. Discovers a tiny vein at back of detached ear.

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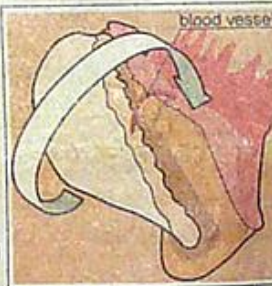
Woman brought into surgery. Dr Davis attaches the ear flap upside down, stitching it to the scalp to get the two blood vessels lined up. Using nylon thread finer than human hair, the blood vessels are joined.



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Dr Davis leaves ear for 15 minutes to make sure the connection is working and makes a cup of tea. Once blood is confirmed pumping into severed piece, he undoes stitches and rotates the ear around the joined 0.2mm wide blood vessel.



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Piece of ear stitched back onto the ear stump.



Total operating time: four hours.

HERALD GRAPHICS