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News

Novel Surgery Reverses Man's Paralysis

By **Ronnie Koenig**



When Vinny Filipini [pictured] suffered a stroke on Dec. 18, 2007, he was left with paralysis in his right arm and little hope of regaining it.

Patients like Filipini, now 47, who suffer a [stroke and paralysis](#), were once doomed to accept the loss of movement in a body area or limb. There was no choice but to simply get used to the fact that their health would be forever compromised and begin the process of emotionally and physically rearranging their lives.

But there's now hope for those left with restricted movement after a [stroke](#) with the success of a nerve transfer surgery performed by Andrew Elkwood, M.D. on Filipini.

Dr. Elkwood and his team, at the [Plastic Surgery Center](#), in Shrewsbury, New Jersey, took nerves from Filipini's legs and attached them to his bad arm. They created a nerve tunnel across his chest so that they could have an "extension cord" of nerves that they hoped would bypass the part of Filipini's brain that was not working and restore functionality.

After months of recovery and therapy, the surgery was declared a success.

Before the surgery, Filipini told surgeons that when he tried to move his arm he had no feeling. Post-surgery, he can perform everyday tasks like getting dressed, albeit slowly.

"It's coming. It's taken a long, long time, boy," he said in a statement released by Elkwood.

Dr. Elkwood is conservatively optimistic about how this might help other [stroke](#) victims.

"It depends on the patient," he said. "If it's a 90-year-old in a nursing home, they may not be a candidate.

"Vinny was a good candidate because he did not have other health problems and he was very motivated," said Dr. Elkwood. "Of course we told him that there was a possibility that the surgery might not work."

But the surgery did work and now Elkwood sees an opportunity to help tens of thousands of people, especially "patients with [spinal cord injuries](#)." He said many spinal cord patients forced to sit for long periods of time "have rear end [pressure sores](#) which are disabling. That is what killed Christopher Reeve. You can't feel your rear and the sores get infected. It's not something that even disabled people want to talk about, it's unpalatable."

Elkwood said it's the sural nerve, which runs down the leg and over the ankle that is used to make the graft.

"We can take nerves from family members. It can cause a slight numbness to the outside of the leg but most people don't even notice it. For paraplegics, we can take nerves from an area where they are not using them. Some don't like this in case there is a cure, but the benefits outweigh not doing it," he said.

The biggest obstacle to helping paraplegics and stroke victims is getting the medical community and lay people to know that this type of surgery is available and that it works.

"It's like having a vaccine that no one knows about," Elkwood added. "As a surgeon that's what frustrates me."

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