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Rare transplant thrills paraplegic daredevil

By Alesha Williams Boyd • FREEHOLD BUREAU

LONG BRANCH — Tory Cavalieri admits he's "a bit of a risk-taker."

A competitive Motocross racer for more than 12 years, Cavalieri, 49, of Manalapan, said he's also a certified scuba diver, a licensed private pilot, an expert skier and a former NASCAR-licensed, late-model stock car driver.

"It's the thrill, the adrenaline, the excitement," Cavalieri said of what drove his active lifestyle.

The thrills came to a screeching halt when Cavalieri suffered a motorcycle accident at Raceway Park in Old Bridge on Labor Day weekend in 2004. His injury — a shattered vertebra — left him a paraplegic, his lower half paralyzed, and his life changed forever.

A team of surgeons and other staff at Monmouth Medical Center work on 49-year-old Tory Cavalieri of Manalapan during the nerve transplant surgery they hope will restore sensation to part of Cavalieri's paralyzed lower body. (APP PHOTO)

But Cavalieri, a former production manager for a printing company, was feeling the old rush of adrenaline on Jan. 13 at Monmouth Medical Center. He was preparing for a rare nerve-transplant surgery that could change his life yet again.

"If it's successful for me, it could be successful for thousands, and that to me would be such a thrill . . . as exciting as racing a Motocross bike." Cavalieri said in his hospital bed before surgery.

His wife, Janet Manzoni, said after the surgery the patient was "doing fine" and the pair remain "cautiously optimistic" about the results.

Dr. Andrew Elkwood conducted the two-hour procedure, during which the surgeon removed 12 inches of functioning sural nerve from Cavalieri's rib area and attached it to his sciatic nerve. Elkwood and Dr. Russell Ashinoff, who helped lead the surgery, are hoping the procedure will restore sensation to Cavalieri's posterior.

And Cavalieri couldn't be happier to get a pain in the rear.

With new adaptive devices being developed for the disabled every day, Cavalieri said he could still enjoy most of the activities he once did. Yet he's been mostly bedridden for years, forced to remain immobile in the family's bi-level because of a pressure ulcer, a gaping hole larger than a fist in the flesh of his posterior.

The ulcers are caused by the lack of movement from being confined to a wheelchair. The wounds fester and worsen because paralyzed patients can't feel them, said Elkwood, chairman of plastic surgery at Monmouth Medical. Treatment can confine victims to a specialized bed for months on end, he said.

"We think of a world where (disabled) people are mainstreamed into society and they can lead a relatively normal life," Elkwood said. "This is probably their greatest drawback to doing so."

He said the ulcers — some which erode muscle and tissue to the bone — are one of the leading causes of mortality and morbidity among paraplegics.

A Shrewsbury and Manhattan-based plastic and reconstructive surgeon with a sub-specialty in nerve and microsurgery, Elkwood says he already has conducted surgeries in which he has restored function for patients with partial paralysis.

But the surgeon, whose efforts have made headlines and earned him appearances on TV shows, including ABC's "Good Morning America," "The Oprah Winfrey Show" and "Discovery Health," said he only knows of three other reported surgeries, two in Brazil and one of his own, in which nerves were transplanted to restore sensation to a paralyzed lower body.

"It's applying technology we use all the time to a new problem. This is not necessarily revolution," Elkwood said of the procedure, during which the surgeons also would close the wound. "It's part of the evolution."

Elkwood estimated it could take up to a year for Cavalieri to know whether the surgery was a success. Patients are highly susceptible to infection and recurrence, Elkwood said, which could cause the transplant to fail.

But Cavalieri, true to form, said he has no fear. If he does regain some sensitivity, he and his wife said they're looking forward to vacationing together — trips to Egypt and Israel have been on hold because of the ulcers.

"There is a lot on the line here, and it was exciting being part of something new," Cavalieri said before the surgery. "I'm leaving it to (Elkwood), and we'll see how it goes."