Returning The Light

Cooperative surgery gives young Haifa bombing victim a second chance at sight

The seaside of Haifa can be beautiful in early October.

Ten-year-old Oran Almog was having lunch with his family and grandparents at Maxim, a popular beachfront restaurant jointly owned by Arabs and Jews, when a young woman wired with explosives walked into the crowded dining room.

Hanadi Jaradat was an apprentice lawyer, but the deaths of her brother and cousin in a raid led her to trade a promising future for revenge. In a thundering flash, Oran's world went dark. His father, brother, cousin and grandparents were among the 21 killed and he, his mother and sister were three of the more than 55 wounded.

Oran's numerous injuries included one eye that was completely destroyed, and the other was so badly damaged that his doctors felt the only choice was to remove it. But his mother pleaded with them to find a way to save the eye.

The search for other options led Israeli doctors to the UAB eye trauma team who had performed surgery on victims of the U.S. Embassy attack in Kenya and the Birmingham clinic bombing.

In more than 200 surgeries, Dr. Robert Morris, Dr. Doug Witherspoon and Dr. Robert Phillips have found that close teamwork between subspecialties and a temporary keratoprosthesis (TKP) can be the keys to saving vision in eyes that would otherwise most likely be removed.

“When the cornea is cloudy, we can’t visualize the back of the eye to determine whether there is a possibility of restoring useful vision, or see to make repairs,” said Dr. Morris, who serves as president of the International Society of Ocular Trauma and the Helen Keller Eye Research Foundation. “If we wait to see if the cornea will clear, we may be too late to repair the retina.”

That’s where the TKP can make the difference, according to the team’s cornea specialist Dr. Phillips.

“When I replace a damaged cornea with a TKP, I can give Dr. Morris and Dr. Witherspoon a window to work,” he said.

The three doctors have been cooperating on ocular traumas since Dr. Phillips described an early version of the Landers-Foulks TKP he saw in development during a fellowship at Duke University. The technology has continued to improve, and today the team uses the latest version, the Landers Wide Field TKP (WTKP.)

In nine hours of surgery, the doctors worked in sequence to save Oran’s sight. After Dr. Phillips had the TKP in place, the retina team went to work with Dr. Morris as lead surgeon, with Dr. Witherspoon consulting beside him.

“When you have a complex case like this, it’s good to have as much experience in the room as possible, especially when you’re making difficult decisions on the best way to proceed,” said Dr. Morris.

“As in many bombing cases, the injuries were bilateral, which make the stakes even higher,” said Dr. Witherspoon. “The retina was twisted, which presented a challenge. However, we were able to straighten and reattach it.”

Dr. Phillips then replaced the TKP with a cornea transplant.

“Before the surgery, Oran was worried about what color his eye would be,” said Dr. Phillips. “I told him he could have a contact lens in any color he wanted, and then he smiled.”

After surgery, Oran could see well enough to kick a soccer ball down the hall of Children’s Hospital. Back at home in Israel, he has overcome setbacks and has surgery for other injuries and a year or two of recovery ahead.

Though his central vision will never be quite the same, the team has hope that Oran will have useful ambulatory sight, so that one day the seaside near his home in Haifa will once again be beautiful to him.

Resources

World Eye Injury Registry

weironline.org

A program of the International Society of Ocular Trauma sponsored by the Helen Keller Foundation for Research and Education