

SURVIVING SEVERE BURNS

Care, family support are salves for rebuilding lives

By Maribel Villalva
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The scars are invisible now.

They are part of the mirror reflection that looks back at David Borowski every day, but he doesn't see them anymore.

He even forgets that he doesn't have fingers to put a wedding ring on. He wears a gold wedding bracelet instead.

Borowski, 45, doesn't remember the fire that burned more than 80% of his body when he was 6 weeks old—the same fire that destroyed his hands and scarred his face and body.

“Doctors told my parents that I would die.”

And in the early 1950s, that generally was the prognosis for burn victims: death resulting from infection.

“I'm a lucky guy,” says Borowski, now a corporate finance manager with mortgage financing giant Freddie Mac in McLean, VA, west of Washington, DC.

A study in the Journal of the American Medical Association indicates that survivors of massive burns can have a good life despite cosmetic and functional impairments that result from the injuries.

Robert Sheridan, a study coordinator, says the study was prompted by the advanced medical technology available to burn victims today. In decades past, many doctors would “let nature take its course,” Sheridan says, because the chances of surviving massive burns were slim.

“We wanted to make sure we were doing the right thing in saving these children,” says Sheridan, assistant chief of staff of the Shriners Burn Hospital for Children in Boston. “What we found is that most people who survive the injuries are happy and productive and glad to be alive.”

The study followed 80 people who were treated for massive burns (on more than 70% of the body) at the Boston hospital from 1969 through 1992. All of the study participants were under age 18 when they were burned.

Sheridan says he found that proper follow-up medical care, involvement in the same activities after the burn as before the burn, and family support are the foundations for a good quality of life.

Family support is what made all the difference for Borowski, he says, especially in grade school, when one female classmate would scream uncontrollably every time he boarded the school bus. She finally was switched to a different bus schedule, he says.

“At school, I used to get the looks and be called all sorts of names, but I’d go home to a family that didn’t treat me any differently,” says Borowski, the third of eight children.

Throughout his childhood, Borowski played Little League baseball and played the trombone in his school’s band.

“There was never anything I thought I couldn’t do.”

Many of the study’s participants were adults by the time follow-up interviews were conducted, and researchers found that of the 80 people, 27 were full-time students, 27 were gainfully employed, and 22 had spouses or significant others. Thirty-three children had been born to the group.

But Borowski says he’s concerned that many people will be misled by the study’s conclusions. In recent years, he has volunteered at several burn survivor camps for children and has given motivational speeches.

He doesn’t always see the happy ending. “There are those survivors who will fall through the cracks,” he says. “These kids can either rebel or withdraw from society. They can become socially and academically stifled.”

Gary Stocco, executive director of the National Burn Victim Foundation, based in Basking Ridge, N.J., agrees.

“The vast majority of burn survivors do overcome their adversity and do become constructive members of society.” Stocco says. “But they need social support to help them make the transition into their new lifestyle.

“I’ve seen some cases where lives have been ruined because there was no support.”

The journal study says close to 1 million American children are burned each year, but only about 3% receive massive burn injuries. The study measured how well the survivors were doing in categories of general health, physical and social functioning, physical role (kneeling, bending or walking), emotional role, mental health, energy/vitality and bodily pain.

Even though the study did not directly look at a participant’s psychological state, Sheridan says depression does play a role in recovery.

But the more time that goes by, the better the outlook, he says. On average most of the study's participants were interviewed about 15 years after they were burned.

"Our results probably would've been different if we'd interviewed people two or three years after their injury," Sheridan says. "The hardest time of all is the first couple of years when the patient has to deal with a new appearance and new physical limitations."

Russell Jones, a clinical psychologist and professor at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, agrees with Sheridan that depression is prevalent in newly burned people.

"Time has a lot to do with how well an individual will respond," Jones says.

He and a colleague, Thomas Ollendick, are the principal investigators in a different study that also evaluates the quality of life for children who are burn survivors.

"This is a very understudied area," Jones says.

Since 1996, Jones and Ollendick have collected data on more than 100 participants, mostly between one and six months after the injury.

Although the results of the study have not been published, Jones says, "most burn survivors do relatively well. There's a minority of people that don't."

Preliminary results indicate that the degree of the loss and trauma will affect a person's recovery: The more devastating the injury, the less favorable the outcome will be.

Nineteen-year-old Tina Peppmuller of Bloomington, Calif., east of Los Angeles, was burned in a house fire when she was 1. The fire burned more than 70% of her body, causing damage to her face, chest, knees, right hand and right shoulder. Much like Borowski, she doesn't remember the incident. And, with the exception of losing her father in the fire, Peppmuller says she has never felt sadness because of the fire or felt sorry for herself.

"I keep a good outlook on life and try not to let anything bring me down," she says.