

Courier-Journal

Estimated printed pages: 5

May 13, 2004

Section: NEWS

Edition: MET=METRO

Page: 01B

Mauling victim's scalp is restored

WOLFSON ANDREW

STAFF

Rare procedure on 4-year-old done at Kosair
ANDREW WOLFSON

awolfson@courier-journal.com

The Courier-Journal

Dr. Mark Chariker was getting ready for bed when he got the call:

A 4-year-old girl had been mauled by the family's pit bull in Hodgenville, Ky. The dog had torn off 70 percent of her scalp, including her forehead.

Chariker, a plastic surgeon, had reattached a scalp once before - in 1994, when a mechanic lost most of his to a drive shaft. But that patient's scalp was recovered in one piece, and little Emily Paige Stinnett's was missing.

"People will bring in a finger if it's cut off, but they wouldn't think to bring in a scalp," Chariker said. "There aren't many that are amputated. I told the emergency room doctors that in order for me to fix this child, you have to get the scalp."

Chariker got the scalp - but in pieces, four of them that the LaRue County Sheriff's Department recovered from the stomach of the 80-pound dog, which was put down shortly after it attacked Emily on April 26 while she was playing in her family's yard.

Yesterday, Chariker talked about the six-hour procedure at Kosair Children's Hospital in which he was able to reattach two of those pieces, and about the prognosis for Emily, who will require five or six more rounds of surgery.

"The greatest problems will be psychological," he said. "She is a beautiful girl, and dealing with this will be difficult for her."

He said her first words when she awoke after surgery illustrated the trauma she had undergone.

"She said, 'Get it off of me,' " apparently thinking she was still being attacked, Chariker said.

Emily was moved out of intensive care on Monday, and her condition has been upgraded from critical to stable. Chariker said she is comfortable and was smiling yesterday when she was allowed to leave her hospital room briefly.

He said he hopes to be able to send her home in two to three weeks.

Her parents declined to comment but allowed Chariker to talk about her treatment and prognosis.

Scalp reattachments have been performed since at least the 1970s, according to news accounts, although they still are rare because the injury is so uncommon. The greatest risk is that a patient whose scalp is cut will bleed to death before his wounds are closed, Chariker said.

Emily's injuries could have been repaired by transplanting skin from elsewhere on her body, but because children's heads

are so large in relation to their body - the scalp represents 18 percent of the skin area of a child - a transplant would have required removing a large piece of tissue from elsewhere on her body, Chariker said.

And no other tissue protects the skull as well as the scalp itself, which is underlined by a layer of fat. None has the same consistency or thickness - or the capability of regrowing Emily's long mane of auburn hair, Chariker said.

Emily's scalp arrived at Kosair on ice, in a cooler, about 11 p.m. the day she was attacked.

While Dr. Mary Fallat tended to the bite wounds on Emily's abdomen and back, Chariker worked in a separate room, inspecting the salvaged tissue under a microscope. The dog's gastric juices had already caused some deterioration, Chariker said, and it took him an hour to examine, clean and repair it.

At midnight he began the task of trying to reattach it in a microsurgical procedure that he likened to reattaching a finger.

But Chariker said the operation was more demanding than the previous scalp reattachment he had performed because the blood vessels in a child are only 1 to 2 millimeters in width, half the size of those in an adult. A millimeter is about one-twenty-fifth of an inch.

After six hours, Chariker said, he was able to sew on two sections of scalp, including one that covered her forehead; the two other pieces were too damaged to restore.

Following the surgery, when blood wasn't flowing fast enough in the one vein he was able to reattach, Chariker said he had to use leeches to suck it out and get the blood moving again. He said that's common in surgical reattachments.

The bare spots on her skull will be covered later, with what is called a free flap - muscle from her back in which hair will be transplanted. The muscle will be covered with skin grafts, he said.

He said it is too soon to know if her hair will grow back on its own, but he said he should be able to reconstruct most of her scalp and restore "a lot of her appearance. Whether we can make it normal is still unknown."

Emily hasn't been allowed to look into a mirror, and she won't be until the last surgery is performed and her therapists say she is ready to do that, he said.

Chariker practices in the Aesthetic Plastic Surgery Institute in Louisville. He said about 60 percent of his work is in reconstructive surgery. He said Emily's treatment and recovery were possible only because of the teamwork of Kosair's emergency room, operating room and intensive care unit staff.

Brian Rublein, a hospital spokesman, said he didn't know how much Emily's treatment will cost or how it will be paid for.

Chariker said Emily's devastating injuries show the need for stronger laws protecting children from exposure to potentially dangerous dog breeds.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has reported that pit bulls and Rottweilers were responsible for about half the 238 dog -bite fatalities in this country from 1979 to 1998.

Some cities and counties across the United States have banned ownership of certain breeds, including pit bulls. But Eric Blow, director of Metro Animal Services in Louisville, said those ordinances have been ineffective, in part because it is so difficult to prove the breed of a particular dog.

He said more effective are laws like one in Louisville that bars dogs from being chained for more than one hour a day because chaining a dog has been shown to create aggressive behavior.

The Stinnetts' family pet had been chained to a stake but got free when the tie-down pulled out of wet dirt, the sheriff's office said. No charges have been filed.

Chariker said the dog had the girl pinned on the ground for "quite some time."

"How she survived, I don't know," he said.

"She is a beautiful girl, and dealing with this will be difficult for her."

Dr. Mark Chariker

PREVENTING DOG BITES

The Humane Society of the United States and the U.S. Postal Service offer these tips on preventing dog bites:

Never approach a strange dog, especially one tied up or confined behind a fence or in a car.

Don't pet a dog, even your own, without letting it see and sniff you first.

Never turn your back to a dog and run away. A dog's natural instinct is to chase and catch fleeing prey.

Don't disturb a dog while it is sleeping, eating, chewing on a toy or caring for puppies.

Be cautious around strange dogs. Always assume that a dog who doesn't know you may see you as an intruder or as a threat.

If a dog seems ready to attack, never scream and run. Remain motionless, hands at your sides, and avoid eye contact with the dog. Remain motionless with your hands at your sides until the dog loses interest in you, then slowly back away until he or she is out of sight.

If the dog does attack, "feed" it your jacket, purse or anything you can put between yourself and the dog.

If you fall or are knocked to the ground, curl into a ball with your hands over your ears and remain motionless. Try not to scream or roll around.

Emily Paige Stinnett, shown in a family photo, was attacked by a pit bull last month in Hodgenville, Ky.

BY SAM UPSHAW JR., THE COURIER-JOURNAL

Dr. Mark Chariker had performed only one previous scalp reattachment, and that was on an adult. He was able to restore two pieces of Emily Paige Stinnett's scalp during a six-hour operation at Kosair Children's Hospital. He said he hopes to be able to send her home in two to three weeks.

Copyright (c) The Courier-Journal. All rights reserved. Reproduced with the permission of Gannett Co., Inc. by NewsBank, inc.