



Dear Colleague

Braemar Hospital plastic surgeon Bulent Yaprak says hand surgery is one of the most complex but rewarding fields of medicine.

The human hand is a complex mechanism, essential to a multitude of tasks from holding a pen, to performing hard labour or even high-fiving a friend. It is also one of the most vulnerable extremities. One out of six work injuries involves the fingers, a quarter of sports injuries involve the hand and wrist.

Braemar plastic surgeon Bulent Yaprak, who specialises in hand surgery, knows better than most the importance of hands – and of the impact on lives when they no longer function effectively. “The hand is one of the organs that makes us human beings capable of production. They are crucial to our lives. You can see that when a patient comes to you and they are not able to work. They have lost their functionality. They want to return to work and they need your help to try to achieve that.”

Dr Yaprak grew up in Turkey and decided to pursue medicine when he was 10. His grandfather, who played a big part in his life, was a doctor and worked in a state-owned coal mine caring for the miners. “I liked the fact he was touching people’s lives very obviously. Many jobs do that, but medicine does it that with the touch of a hand or a finger.”

He studied medicine at Hacettepe University in Ankara before beginning his plastic surgeon training at the prestigious University Hospital in Istanbul, the country’s major teaching hospital. The hospital attracted the country’s leading teachers, including a plastic surgeon who specialised in hand surgery and had worked with leprosy patients in Ethiopia. Dr Yaprak saw the impact of the surgeon’s skill working on rare deformities that regular plastic surgeons would not see.

He also witnessed the impact on the patients’ lives and was influenced by that. He followed the same path and now works as a consultant at Waikato Hospital and privately at Braemar Hospital.

His work covers a wide variety of procedures, including trauma from sports injuries, such as fractures and tendon injuries; congenital hand deformities in children, degenerative diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis and conditions such as tendinitis and carpal tunnel syndrome. In 2012, he made headlines when he reattached the fingers of a Waikato meat-worker who had sliced through his fingers with a hock cutter. The operation, which took 20 hours and involved five surgeons, five anaesthetists and 10 nurses, used microsurgical techniques working with vessels less than 1mm in diameter.

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Plastic Surgeon, Bulent Yaprak

In another operation he reattached the thumb of a young girl. “She later wrote me a letter with the hand which had the thumb reattached. She was still able to write and dance. I have kept her letter.”

He says, while all operations aren’t so dramatic, each can transform a patient’s life. “A person with arthritis may be able to knit again; they may be able to do up their own buttons or lift a cup of tea. A person with carpal tunnel syndrome may have pain-free sleep. These are things most of us take for granted. But for people who have lost that capacity it can be frustrating and inhibiting.”

He says the possibilities for future procedures in hand surgery are infinite.

There have already been 80 hand transplants throughout the world. “It will happen in New Zealand. I would like to be part of it.”

As well as hand surgery and other general plastic surgery, Dr Yaprak also specialises in hair transplants and is the only plastic surgeon in New Zealand working in the field. Last year, he completed an eyebrow transplant on Hamilton rugby enthusiast Yusef Komene. A car crash 25 years before had left the Melville rugby supporter with bad scarring and a flap of skin from a graft with no hair follicles.

The surgical procedure involved harvesting hair follicles from the back of a patient’s head and transplanting them above his eye. Other hair transplants are done for men who experience premature hair loss and men or women who have scarring or alopecia.

Dr Yaprak says, while some people regard cosmetic hair transplants as frivolous, the decision is entirely the business of those undergoing the procedure. “If the patient feels the need, that’s the only driver.”

Like hand surgery, hair transplants are intricate and require patience, he says. “You are working with tiny tissues. It is very precise.”

Dr Yaprak came to New Zealand eight years ago, after meeting and marrying his Kiwi wife, Caren, who was teaching English and working part-time as a nanny in Turkey at the time. The couple has two sons aged 8 and five. They live on a lifestyle block, where they have sheep and goats. He says he is working on his shearing skills and has shorn a Suffolk sheep with clippers bought from Trade Me. “It’s quite a difficult technique,” says the man who carries out surgical operations on one of the most complex organs in the human body. “I had to learn not to pull the wool or you will nick the skin.”

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Greg Spark".

Dr Greg Spark - Deputy Chairman

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