

NEWS

UCLA has a mission to mend wounds of war

BY MATTHEW FLEMING /STAFF WRITER | May 25, 2014 | Updated May 26, 2014 12:21 p.m.



Sgt. Maj. Colin Rich, featured at the UCLA Tiverton House, has received many treatments in UCLA's Operation Mend program which does reconstructive surgery and other treatments for veterans wounded in Afghanistan and Iraq.



Rich visits with the locals in Afghanistan while deployed there sometime in 2005 or 2006

He didn't hear the gunshot until after the bullet knocked him down.

On the ground, face bloodied, Army Sgt. Maj. Colin Rich heard a loud bang, followed by one of his troops telling him he'd been shot.

What started as a routine patrol quickly became a bloody ambush by the Taliban, somewhere near the Pakistan border in Afghanistan in late 2002.

Pick your platitude about life's randomness: Anything can happen. Expect the unexpected. In the blink of an eye. They all apply.

Colin Rich certainly didn't look like a man who'd had five major surgeries in four years when he walked into the library at UCLA's Tiverton House this month.

He walked in strong and proud. He wasn't limping. He had full range of motion in his arms. He had no empty patches in his hair that could come from scarring.

Except for the white collapsible cane and black sunglasses, there were no clues that this was the man who had had two shoulder reconstructive surgeries, two elbow surgeries to relieve numbness in his fingers and one surgery to remove dead brain tissue and skull fragments.

"They did a real good job closing me up," said Rich, a veteran of eight tours of duty. "I can't overstate how much this program has done for me."

UCLA Medical Center's Operation Mend started in 2007 to provide returning military personnel with cosmetic and reconstructive surgeries for injuries suffered in battle or training.

Rich, 51, now retired in Raeford, N.C., after a 26-year military career that included deployments in Panama, the first Gulf War, three tours in Bosnia, Afghanistan, Iraq and back to Afghanistan again, is one of 104 soldiers to have received treatment as part of a program entirely funded through grants and individual donors.

The care costs the patients nothing.

Doctors use a holistic approach to treat the patients, according to Dr. Kodi Azari, professor of orthopedic and plastic/reconstructive surgery at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA and co-medical director of the UCLA Operation Mend program. Since most vets are suffering from more than one injury, the program tries to mend them all, while offering the red-carpet treatment.

"We pay for their operations, pay for their travel and give them a stipend while they're here," Azari said. "Somebody (even) meets them at TSA and they escort them from the airplane gate."

A buddy family – a Los Angeles-based, volunteer family – is also assigned to each patient. They play the role of familial supporter and social organizer while the service member is in town, hoping to ease the acclimation to the sprawling megalopolis.

"This is so that they don't feel that L.A. is such a big, scary place," said Azari. "It makes it into a family away from family."

But this doesn't replace the need for real family, too.

"We want their family members to come with them, and we pay for that, too," Azari said. "We think it requires a family for them to heal. It's not just the external things that we're fixing, but the internal scars as well. And having family close to you, that loves you and cares for you – that's helpful as well."

Rich would have never found out about the program had it not been for a chance meeting in 2009 with Adm. Michael Mullen, then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Rich was being honored by the Society for Brain Mapping and Therapeutics in Boston when he ran into Mullen, who asked Rich to tell him what happened.

“I told him about the side effects, the uncontrolled seizure disorder, and he looked over at one of his people, and said ‘Hey, maybe he’s a good candidate for this Operation Mend program.’” Rich recalled. “Next thing you know I’m getting a call.”

Rich came to Operation Mend suffering from several ailments, but he was only seeking treatment for his vision, Azari said. Rich has central field blindness – meaning he can see only out of the corner of his eyes – which besides the seizures had gradually developed since he was shot in 2002.

Unfortunately, the doctors were unable to do anything about the vision impairment. But they noticed that Rich was suffering in other ways.

Both shoulders had been dislocated – the right from a skydiving training accident and the left from what Rich described as “living hard in the military.” His hearing was impaired. He was experiencing numbness in his fingers from entrapped nerves in his elbows.

It was something he would just deal with, he figured. Some of the other patients had severe burns and other serious injuries and he didn’t think it was appropriate to even mention his problems, which seemed minor in comparison.

“I just thought, ‘I’m not worthy,’” Rich said.

At dinner one evening at the home of Dana and Todd Katz – Dana is the volunteer coordinator of the buddy family program and Todd is the son of Operation Mend’s founder, Ronald – he was urged to have his other ailments checked out as well.

“I did and that’s when all the procedures started,” Rich said. “I told Dr. Azari that ‘I’m not worried about a couple of fingers.’ He said ‘You will be when your whole hand is inoperable.’

“And he basically said ‘I’m going to do this surgery on you because you have it coming.’”

The doctors went to work. They reconstructed Rich’s shoulders. They took care of the nerve entrapment in his elbows. They performed a surgery to alleviate the seizure disorder. They even fitted him for hearing aids.

“We saw that this poor man, who had served the country, was living in chronic pain,” said Azari. “This was a holistic approach – it wasn’t just one thing. We saw that he had multiple needs and we addressed those with really the best physicians available everywhere. And we paid for all of it.”

Care for some patients has cost as much as \$500,000. Since its inception, the program has provided close to 1,000 flights and arranged approximately 6,000 hotel nights for patients and their families, and has often performed multiple operations per patient – with philanthropy footing the bill. But according to Azari, the program’s primary need is patients, not money.

“We need as many patients as possible,” said Azari. “We have the full support of the medical center, which is incredibly generous. The difference between us and other groups or maybe the military is that we can turn on the dime. If they’re an aircraft carrier taking care of the masses, we are the speed boat that can really turn to be able to tailor our treatment for each patient.”

The primary qualification for the program is to have been injured in a current conflict or during training. The candidate’s file will be reviewed once they call.

“But all they need to do is call,” said Azari. “Our criteria are fairly loose because we want to be able to help as many people as we can.”

Azari said the program is capable of expanding to accommodate more patients. The program is designed to run lean, spending as little money on administrative costs as possible, including advertising. Getting the word out is an obstacle.

“That’s become my personal mission over on the East Coast,” Rich said. “To spread the word about this program to anyone who will listen. In my mind, (Operation Mend’s staff) are fighting the war on terror as hard as anyone downrange. They’re picking up the aftermath.

“I’ve told every doctor that I’ve encountered, ‘Thank you for your service.’”

Now that he’s retired, Rich spends much of his time with his grandchildren and, occasionally, goes shooting. His vision has affected his accuracy to an extent, but he said he’s still a pretty good shot. The brain surgery was recent – it’s still unknown how well it worked on his seizure disorder. But there’s no question his remaining years will be spent in a greater degree of comfort after having gone through Operation Mend.

“This is an amazing program, it really is,” Rich said. “I’m an old man, I like to see the younger people with their families, with their kids, getting taken care of – it makes me feel good, it makes me think people care.”

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