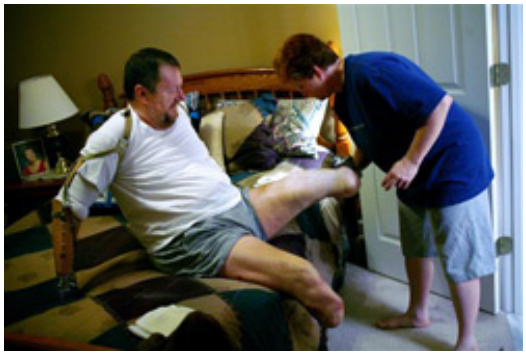
Double Hand Transplant Patient Recovering Well

By Dan Nephin Associated Press Writer



In this photo taken Wednesday Feb. 4, 2009, Valarie Kepner washes her husband, Jeff Kepner's legs following a shower in the morning before she heads to work and he waits to take his daughter to school in Augusta, Ga. Jeff Kepner, who lost his hands and feet to a bacterial infection 10 years ago, underwent surgery lasting just under nine hours Monday May 4, 2009, at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, where a team of surgeons worked on each hand simultaneously, a hospital spokeswoman said. (AP Photo/Augusta Chronicle, Kendrick Brinson)

PITTSBURGH (AP) — Valarie Kepner was so excited at learning last fall that doctors might be able give her husband new hands that she called the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center without telling him first. Jeff Kepner, 57, had lost his hands and feet a decade ago to sepsis that developed from a strep infection. On Monday, he became the first person to undergo a double hand transplant in the United States and the second person to undergo a hand transplant through the hospital's new hand transplant program. "I really wanted him to regain his independence," Kepner said in an interview Thursday at UPMC. "I think he's really excited," she said. "Just being able to look down and kinda see the fingertips, you know, which really is the only thing that's showing at this point, I think is really neat for him. He kinda keeps looking down and looking at them. It's kinda cool." Kepner, of Augusta, Ga., isn't able to move his new hands or feel them yet; that will depend on how long it takes for his nerves to grow, a process that could take months. "This

whole surgery just opens up just the possibilities for him to just to be able regain his independence in so many ways and to go back ... to cook and to do the things he could do in the past," she said. After retiring from the Air Force, where he was the slow-pitch softball team's pitcher, he went to school to become a pastry chef, she said. He has a 13-year-old daughter and looks forward to playing with her. He also has two adult children and two grandsons. "He keeps teasing our choir director that he wants to play a piano duet with her," Kepner said. "Even if he could only play 'Chopsticks,' she would be thrilled." Over the years, he adapted to his prosthetics — he can drive and works at Borders — but he relied on Valarie to shower and help dress him. When she first told him about the possibility of surgery, "He was kinda like, 'OK, but you know, I can do all these things with my prosthetics. I've already learned how to do all this. I'm not sure this is something I would want to do.'" Meetings with UPMC doctors allayed his concerns, she said. UPMC developed a protocol that aims to reduce the amount of toxic anti-rejection medications that must be taken so that the hands are not rejected, said Dr. W.P. Andrew Lee, chief of plastic surgery. The medications can increase the risk for diabetes, infections and other complications. So Kepner decided to go ahead with the procedure, also with the hopes that the procedure may become more commonplace and help others, Valarie Kepner said. The Kepners flew to Pittsburgh on Sunday after the hands became available. According to the Center for Organ Recovery and Education, the donor was a 23-year-old Pennsylvania man and the father of a 1-year-old son. "The donor comes from a close-knit Christian family who is praying for Mr. Kepner and his family and asks that others keep the recipient and family in their thoughts and prayers," CORE said in a statement. The man's heart, lungs, liver, pancreas, kidneys and tissue went to other recipients. "My heart just goes out to the family," Valarie Kepner said. "They've been in our prayers that they've had this happen to them," Valarie Kepner said. "We could never thank them enough." He'll likely remain at UPMC for another several weeks, then remain in Pittsburgh for several months while undergoing rehabilitation therapy. Lee said 10 hand surgeons divided into four teams for the procedure: two prepared Kepner's forearms and two prepared the donor's hands. The teams worked simultaneously, and the surgery took just less than nine hours. "Everyone really worked together really well," Lee said. Eight double hand transplants have been performed abroad. Last month, French physicians performed the world's first simultaneous partial face and double hand transplant.

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