Surgeons Remove Shears From Eye Socket

Amanda Lee Myers, AP

Leroy Luetscher could feel the pruning shears jutting from his face as he tried to determine just what had happened to him after trimming the plants in his backyard and then falling face-first. At 86, Luetscher was covered in blood and in more pain than he'd ever felt in his life. One of the shears' handles had gone into his right eye socket and halfway into his head.

Coping with excruciating pain that he believes kept him conscious, Luetscher managed to put his T-shirt over the wound to stanch the bleeding and beckon his longtime live-in girlfriend, who called 911. "I didn't know if my eyeball was still there or what," Luetscher, who lives in southern Arizona's Green Valley, told The Associated Press on Tuesday. "The pain was so bad that I guess I wasn't afraid to die."

Luetscher, a Wisconsin native, has made a remarkable recovery since the July 30 accident. He still has slight swelling in his eyelids and minor double vision, but is otherwise okay. Doctors who removed the shears and rebuilt a bone in Luetscher's eye socket say it could have been much worse. "He's was very lucky that it missed all vital structures and we were basically able to put him back together," Dr. Lynn Polonski said.

After Luetscher's girlfriend, Arpy Williams, called 911, an ambulance rushed him to University Medical Center in Tucson, where a team of surgeons took scans of his brain and came up with a plan to treat him. They learned the shears' handle had gone 6 inches into Luetscher's head and was resting against the carotid artery in his neck. "It was a bit overwhelming," said Polonski, one of Luetscher's surgeons. "It was wedged in there so tightly, you could not move it. It was part of his face."

Polonski said the team made incisions underneath his right upper lip and his sinus wall, allowing them to loosen the handle of the pruning shears with their fingers. "Once we were able to loosen it up, it went fairly easily," he said. Doctors rebuilt Luetscher's orbital floor with a titanium plate and put him on antibiotics for 20 days to stave off an infection that could have proved fatal.

Polonski said so many things could have gone much worse for Luetscher. The shears could have ruptured his eye ball, hit his brain or severed his carotid artery. "You know, if it went a little bit in a different direction, it basically could have killed him or he could have had a stroke," Polonski said. Polonski said he's never seen anything like Luetscher's injury in his 13 years as a surgeon.

Luetscher said he was born and raised about 30 miles outside Madison, Wisconsin, and worked as an executive in the dairy industry before retiring to Arizona in 1998. He said he's not sure he'll be doing much more gardening in the future. "If that instrument had gone in any direction different than it did, I would have bled right there to death," he said.

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