



Rebuilding Bodies and Lives After TBI

How San Diego's Dr. Hosalkar improves recovery for traumatic brain injury patients

Many patients suffering from a traumatic brain injury (TBI) or a deformity resulting from one are told there

are few or no options for recovery. San Diego orthopedic surgeon Dr. Harish Hosalkar shares a different message: "You don't have to accept failure. There are solutions that can make your life better."

Through Alliance Medical Group and his work at Scripps, Sharp, and Prime Health, Dr. Hosalkar helps these patients improve their quality of life, function, or both. But as part of his quest to restore physical and mental health to his patients, he recognizes the nearly insurmountable challenges facing those suffering from the unique diagnosis.



ARIANA DREHSLER

Dr. Hosalkar's Mission -----

Working in his native India, Dr. Hosalkar performed surgeries for cerebral palsy patients and in polio camps, treating patients whose families lacked resources for vaccination against the preventable disease. In the United States, while continuing to help patients with cerebral palsy and adult polio residual paralysis, he found another group in severe need of help.

Dr. Hosalkar trained under Dr. Mary Ann Keenan at the University of Pennsylvania, a pioneer in neuro-orthopedic surgery, and Dr. Richard Lackman, a master surgeon and a leader in the field of orthopedic oncology. Both these mentors helped him develop skill sets that would be most invaluable in his orthopedic career. In 2009, Dr. Hosalkar moved to California, where he became an extremely rare specialist in the state (and many surrounding states, as well) performing deformity corrections for TBI patients.

The Struggle for Help -----

Dr. Hosalkar saw that many doctors equipped to improve quality of life for TBI patients often prioritize marquee cases, like NFL players. "I do cutting-edge stuff and treat gymnasts and professional athletes," says Dr. Hosalkar. "I also treat this completely different population, who just want to sit up in a chair, drink a cup of coffee with their own hand for once in their life, or maybe just brush their teeth."

Many health care providers lack the resources to help TBI patients recover. On top of the need for specialists with

niche expertise, ancillary care teams, such as anesthesiologists, nurses, and physical and occupational therapists, require additional training. The scarcity forces patients to travel to find an appropriate facility, adding housing costs for themselves and their families during treatment. Even for patients with insurance, costs mount quickly, with increased complications stemming from out-of-state care. Many physician colleagues in the hospitals, unaware of the goals of these interventions, are resistant to supporting the care of these patients and sometimes to being a part of the team. Dr. Hosalkar continues to fight for his patients and their medical care against all odds.

Improving with Awareness -----

The lack of knowledge about recovery possibilities and the help these patients need is part of the problem, says Dr. Hosalkar. They are just human beings who happened to have something terrible happen to them—a stroke, a freak accident, a car crash—and suddenly went from living a normal life to one defined and limited by their injuries. But few understand that they still have the ability to come back and live a fairly, if not completely, normal life. Over the years, Dr. Hosalkar has helped hundreds of patients of TBI. This article highlights some of the patients' stories to create awareness.



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KASEY FIELDS

Kasey Walks Again

Just a year after she met her husband walking along the Pacific Beach boardwalk, 34-year-old Kasey Fields suffered a Grade V (extremely severe) brain aneurysm and stroke, which left her entire left side deformed. She was on life support for six weeks. In the course of her treatment, she had a tracheotomy and was put on a feeding tube, but she was given little explanation of what that meant or what her path to recovery could look like. A therapist told her she would never walk again.

Two years after her stroke, she was referred to Dr. Hosalkar, who told her the opposite.

Without Dr. Hosalkar's help, Kasey believes she'd still be living in a contracted body, with her neck lying on her shoulder. He performed more than a dozen surgeries to release Kasey's tendons and install plates, starting with her left foot and working up to her neck. Now, she can walk in water and continues making progress in therapy toward doing so on solid ground.

"I am able to live a normal life, thanks to my great doctor," says Kasey. "His sweet demeanor and kindness got me through my worst days."

Ready to Roll

In 2018, Gretchen Kong went to Paris as part of a student exchange program. Despite always carefully checking with servers about her seafood allergy at restaurants, she ate something that caused a severe reaction. By the time the ambulance arrived, her lips were blue and she was passing out and had possibly entered cardiac arrest. Bronchospasms cut off air to her lungs and oxygen to her brain for many minutes. When she got to the hospital, doctors put her into a medically induced coma, which she remained in for three weeks. Her family had to medically evacuate her back to the US.

For the first year after Gretchen's accident, she remained hospitalized, completely bedridden. All her limbs were contracted to the point that she couldn't even sit properly in a wheelchair. She could not speak, and her reactions were limited to a few basic expressions—a happy look, a sad look, a pained look.

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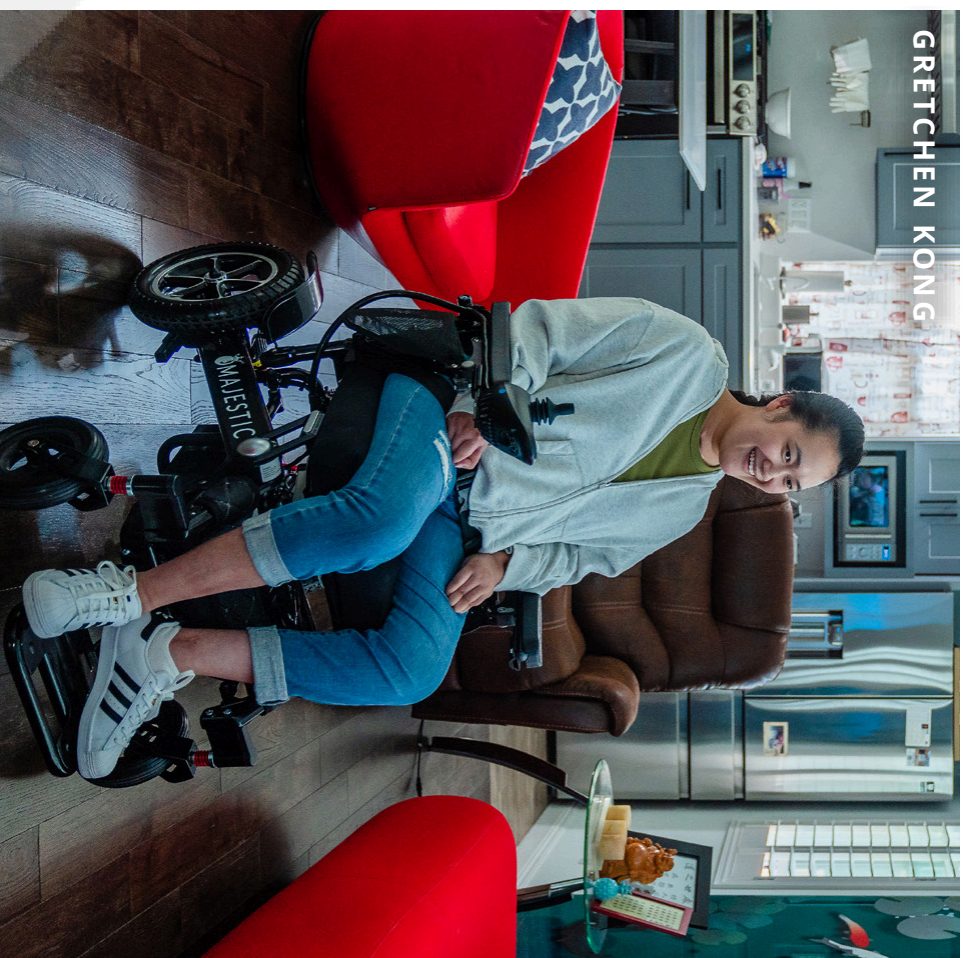
GRETCHEN KONG

Gretchen bounced between various hospitals until a rehab facility referred her to Dr. Hosalkar. In 2019, and since then, she has undergone a series of corrective surgeries. Now, she can stand up on one of her feet, balancing with help from others. She uses her hands, can make a fist, and not only sits up in the wheelchair, but controls it with a stick remote herself.

"It takes a lot of time to do physical therapy," she says. "But [in] the end, everything will work." While Gretchen still has some more surgeries to come, she has returned to school, attending in-person college classes for people with TBI. She looks forward to her continued recovery. "I'm as ready as I'll ever be!" she says. "I'm as ready as I'll ever be!" she says.



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Peter's 2,300 Steps

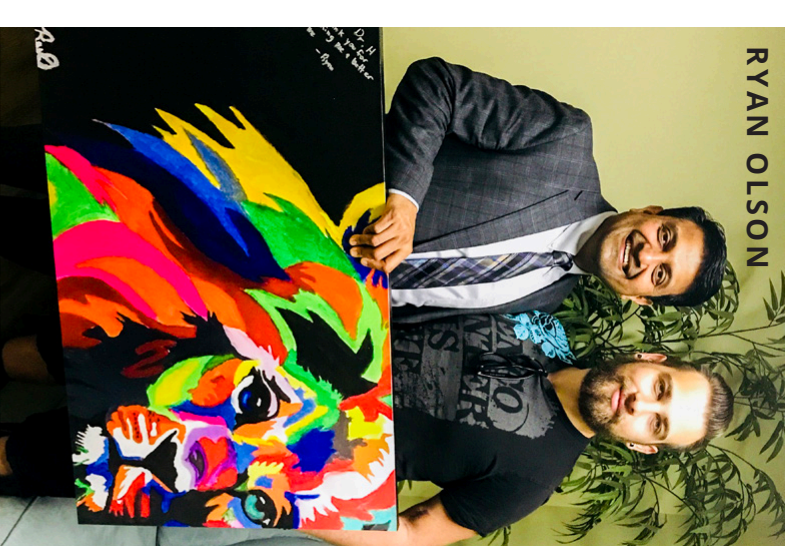
Any activity he could do outside, radio frequency engineer Peter Sroka would be there, mountain hiking, trekking, and cycling. Then, at age 51, while commuting home on his bike, he hit an unmarked, unlit metal plate on the road that was not properly ramped or signed. He was thrown 20 yards down the road. Though he was wearing his helmet, he experienced a traumatic brain injury, as well as pelvis damage, a broken collarbone, and some broken ribs.

Despite one surgery on his foot, Peter was still in a lot of pain about a year after the accident. He continued to make progress in other areas—18 months after the accident, he could finally eat again, rather than being tube-fed, and could reliably communicate using more than a few rudimentary signs. But heterotopic ossification meant that one of his legs remained stuck straight and could not bend. His doctor recommended he see Dr. Hosalkar.

After Dr. Hosalkar performed two reconstructive surgeries on his feet, Peter's life vastly improved. "He's able to do so much more," says his wife, Jane.

"Walking and standing, you can't do them if your feet aren't flat." It's made a huge difference, and even a few years later, she continues to keep in touch with Dr. Hosalkar and send him videos of Peter's progress. "He was easy to work with, very responsive," she says.

"He's very good at putting things in different places to make them work." In Peter's case, that's meant the opportunity to walk again: He's made it 2,300 steps and counting.



RYAN OLSON

The motorcycle accident that killed Ryan Olson's best friend also left the 19-year-old with a diffuse axonal brain injury, unable to take care of daily tasks for himself. He was wheelchair-bound and struggling with the many things the medical community told him he could never do again. When he woke up after 37 days in a coma, he found himself unable to do the things he loved: painting, sketching, making art. But Ryan was a warrior, a fighter determined to defy the odds stacked against him, his mom explains.

He relearned how to walk, to breathe, to live. In Dr. Hosalkar, Ryan found a beacon of hope. Within months of his first surgery, Ryan was able to walk with the aid of a knee brace and foot orthotics. And, thanks to the work on his hands, he could once again tie his own shoes before setting off on those steps. In 2024, ten years after his accident,

almost a decade beyond those first steps, Ryan completed a two-mile walk in support of the San Diego Brain Injury Foundations' Survive Headstrong Fundraiser. For Ryan and his mom, she says, "Dr. Hosalkar is more than just a surgeon. He is a guardian of dreams, a harbinger of hope." Ryan has returned to making art and passes on that hope and inspiration through Revive Art Studios, which he formed to provide a platform for TBI survivors to share their art with the world.





PETER SROKA

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Reviving an Artist

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