



More Amputees Proud to Wear Artificial Limbs

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When a severe infection caused Jan Schumacher, 58, of Portland Ore., to lose her fingers, she preferred a functional prosthetic hand to a glossy silicone one that would look more natural.

"Jan came to us and told us she wanted something 'tricky cool,'" said MacJulian Lang, a prosthetist and clinical director of Advanced Arm Dynamics in Portland.

Lang outfitted her with a prosthesis that looks more like a motorcycle glove than a prosthetic hand. The fingers move with a slight flex of a muscle in Schumacher's palm. Now, Schumacher is able to grab her coffee mug, lift weights, or even open a door.

And the glove-shaped prosthesis comes fully equipped with an iPod Nano – not because it serves any prosthetic purpose, but because it helps the prosthesis look really cool said Lang.

Two million amputees currently live in the U.S., according to the nonprofit Amputee Coalition, an advocacy group. 570 people lose a limb each day.

Now, more of those patients say they couldn't care less about fitting in and hiding their amputations. Instead, many say they are embracing their circumstances and finding ways to flaunt them.

"Long gone are the days of the wooden leg," said Lang. "Much more often now people roll up their sleeves and show the prosthesis for what it is."

Before her amputation, Schumacher owned one of the largest bridal stores in Oregon. Her store, "Tres Fabu Bridal," handled nearly 1,200 weddings a year. But after her infection and subsequent amputation, Schumacher had to close her store.

"I went from owning a business, to not even being able to open a door on my own," she said. "For many of us, the experience has been so debilitating."

Schumacher considered wearing a prosthesis while undergoing rehabilitation. But she said she did not know what to expect.

"First you think of the hook, like Captain Hook. But I was shown an articulated hand, so that gave me hope," she said.

New Limbs: A Process of Physical and Emotional Healing

For many amputees, coming to terms with wearing prostheses requires the emotional process of owning up to the initial limb loss.

"They're not ready to have a solution for something that they're not accepting as a loss in the first place," said Amy Natisco, an occupational therapist at Good Samaritan Regional Medical Center in Corvallis, Ore.

According to Natisco, some patients have higher than likely expectations.

"When people first think about receiving a prosthesis, their thought process is this is going to replace what they lost," she said.

While the prosthesis does help many patients regain parts of their function, it is not a complete limb replacement. Natisco says that more patients are likely to embrace their prosthesis if they have realistic expectations about what they can do.

"I love to see someone become more accepting of what their body is and what they're body can do," said Natisco.

She said about a third of the patients she worked with embraced their prosthetic with what she called a "hey look at me" attitude.

More than 3,000 patient care facilities provide orthotic and prosthetic services, according to the American Orthotic and Prosthetic Association. In 2009, Medicare covered nearly 2.3 million prosthetic services.

While Hollywood movies make real-looking prosthetic limbs seem a long time coming, the technology is rising as a recent phenomenon. Movable and even experimental prosthesis that mimic real limbs have only emerged within the last five years.

Not all who choose to wear prostheses are outfitted with the latest devices.

"I think the technology, although it's improving, it's not readily accessible for all patients who need a prosthetic solution," said Natisco. "But as it becomes more available then more may feel empowered."

Schumacher Chooses Her Hand the Second Time Around

When Schumacher met with Lang, she said exactly what she was looking for.

"A lot of the natural hands just lay there and don't function," said Schumacher. "If I'm going to cover my hand, I didn't want to do it so I could look better. I wanted it to work."

Lang worked with Schumacher to create a hand that tailored to her personality. Lang says his company, Advanced Arm Dynamics, works independently with each of its patients to create a personalized prosthesis. That process helps some patients accept their prosthesis and overcome any feelings of shame, he said.

"They take their prosthesis and make it a part of themselves," said Lang. "Function is the driving factor, but if you can make something where a patient is part of the process, they take ownership of it more."

Schumacher won't stop showing off her new hand.

"The independence gives a little courage back," said Schumacher. "The prosthesis does give you back confidence."

She says she can cook for a group, and freely talks about the hand with her friends. And when she's over feeling fabulous about the hand she has now, she says she'll probably start looking for something better.

"I want to wear any and all of the newest things. I want to keep pushing the envelope," she said.