

Doctor gets patients up and walking

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by Julie Drake

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LANCASTER - Dr. Thomas Nasser is a man of fierce dedication to his patients and his profession.

A doctor of osteopathic medicine, he often treats amputee patients suffering from profound physical and emotional wounds. His determination drives him every day to help those in need at the Antelope Valley Orthopaedic & Rehabilitation Specialists center in Lancaster where he works.

Nasser, whose specialty is physical medicine and rehabilitation, said he has treated patients who were told by their doctors they would never walk again.

"I just refuse that statement. I just don't think if we can put a man on the moon, you can't walk. It's a tough business to be in, but you have to really be passionate about believing these people can gain function with the technology that we have and you have to not be willing to give up. I tell them, 'Next time I see you in here, get rid of that wheelchair,'" Nasser said.

The loss of a limb from an accident or disease can be a shock to people.

"There's a depression that goes beyond what a typical depression would cause. We all take for granted every day that our arms and our



Evelyn Kristo photos

JOB DEDICATION -- Above, Dr. Thomas Nasser, left, works with amputee patient Kevin Kahl on Friday at his Lancaster medical office.

legs are going to be there, that we're going to walk," Nasser said. "You can have sympathy all you want; you're never going to know what it's like to have to walk on a fake leg or have to use a fake arm to manipulate your tools at work or something like that."

Osteopathic doctors receive the same basic training as medical doctors with additional training in musculoskeletal manipulation, similar to chiropractic care or physical therapy. (The musculosk-

letal system is the body's interconnected system of nerves, muscles and bones that make up two-thirds of the body's mass.)

They also take courses in areas such as human spirituality, sociology and nutrition that Nasser said allows them to approach patients with a different perspective, with the understanding that the patient has been affected on multiple levels from an injury.

"If you translate that into a person who's had an ampu-

tation, the main deal is that they have a loss, a significant loss. I mean, you've grown up with that limb your whole life, you've been participating in your daily living your whole life, and now there's an emotional component to the loss," Nasser said. "Ultimately, if you don't account for the psychological and the emotional and the spiritual impact that people experience when they lose a limb, then you're going to under-treat their problem."

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The Inland Empire native, who has been practicing for seven years, the last three in the Antelope Valley, said although he can write a prescription for the perfect prosthesis with an ideal fit for the patient, it's important to take into account the patient may be depressed because he can't do something the way he could before a limb was amputated.

That's why Nasser works with counselors, pain counselors or psychiatrists, to help amputees adjust to their new lives. So it's not uncommon for Nasser to have patients try anti-depressants.

"I often find going into it with that attitude, I am able to better treat and I am able to get them further along than I typically would have, had I just given them a prescription for a prosthesis. These people tend to be lifelong patients because of that thing," Nasser said.

Another important aspect is picking the right team members.

I tell my staff, every smile is important, every comment is important. If you don't take care of these human beings like a human being, you're going to do a crappy job. That's why I like Mike; he's friendly, smiling and the patients like him so much. That's something you don't learn in school," Nasser said.



MINDING DETAILS -- Dr. Thomas Nasser, left, looks over the fit of a prosthetic leg Friday for patient Kevin Kahl at his Lancaster medical office.

"Mike" is Michael Meticecchia, an orthotist and prosthetist at Pacific Prosthetics & Orthotics who works with Nasser and is also one of his patients. He said Nasser goes out of his way to help his patients.

"I don't want to put people down, but it's just a phenomenal follow-through, compared to most other physicians. He sees potential in patients that a lot of other physicians might never. He's willing to give a patient the benefit of the doubt, especially dealing with prosthetics. It takes a lot of effort on the patients' behalf. For a physician to be able to see and give them the opportunity to do it, he's willing to work with the patients and give them the opportunities," said Meticec-

chia, who has an internal limb replacement.

The pair conduct an amputee clinic about once a month, in which patients who go to the clinic can see a physical therapist, doctors and prosthetist and be evaluated at the same time by all caretakers.

"These are found at high-level university settings, and I'm trying to build something in this community," Nasser said.

Longtime Lancaster attorney Kevin Kahl, one of Nasser's patients, is adjusting to the use of his prosthetic leg with the help of Nasser and Meticecchia, who made the prosthetic. October will mark Kahl's second year as an amputee. He lost the lower half of his right leg following an automobile crash when another driving ran a red light and struck his vehicle. He is working with Nasser and Meticecchia to start an amputee support group in the Valley.

"This is a complete mystery for amputees. It can cause a lot of problems, and the support group is something only amputees can know. If you get past the emotional part, which I don't think you ever completely get past. There was a lot of frequent crying in the months following it until you eventually adjust," Kahl said.

"I think so much anytime you have that happen, the

first thing you do is question your ability to continue earning a living for your family. Whether you're getting in the way because they're having to care for you so much initially. Suddenly, your wife has been your lover and your friend, and you start feeling more like she's your nurse, and you worry about continuing your relations."

He said the emotional support is necessary, and he hopes to eventually lead the support group. "I don't know enough about it to do it well, but I'm going to give it a try," Kahl said.

Kahl said Nasser and Meticecchia have helped him adjust to his prosthetic.

"They can see whenever my strength's bad; they can get me into physical therapy. Every time I have little problems, they spot sores, tell you how to take care of sores. You find out the boobos can be serious," Kahl said.

Nasser said Kahl has taught them as well.

"We're all taking out extra time to act as a team," Nasser said. "It has to be something you just want to do because you know it's the best way to do it."

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