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A Touching Gesture


By George Burden, MD

When I was an intern, my rotation on plastic surgery coincided with a major mining disaster in which a number of workers were severely burned. During my months with the plastics ward, I grew pretty close to the injured miners, some of whom were barely out of their teens and very close to my age. One of my patients was a young fellow, we'll call Danny, who had badly burned hands. The digits of his right hand had very little mobility and Danny was undergoing physiotherapy to work on flexing his fingers, all but the middle finger, which had been wired due to fracturing. Unfortunately, Danny had become despondent and lost motivation.

I jokingly told Danny that every time he saw me walk past his door he was to try and give me a certain universal hand gesture, which involved flexing all digits with the exception of the middle finger. This, if successfully executed, would nicely flex his scarred digits.

Danny thought this was great and diligently practised every time I walked by the door, hand raised with a big grin on his face. Time went by and my days on the plastics rotation were drawing to an end. Danny had made a great deal of progress but hadn't quite regained full movement in his hand.

On my final day I was walking down the hallway with the surgeon who would be evaluating me for plastics. I had just finished explaining what a good rapport I had developed with my patients during this rotation when we passed Danny's door. He'd obviously been practising to give me a special going away present.

With fist in the air, four fingers completely flexed and middle finger fully extended, Danny yelled, "Hey doc! After all you've done for me the past two months, you deserve this!" 

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