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Newtown woman recovers from broken neck thanks to cutting-edge medicine

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It was only after her husband Keith was sure Trudy Tuffy would stride through life again, that he told her what doctors had told him -- that she probably would spend her days paralyzed **from the neck** down. "It was probably three-quarters of the way through rehabilitation," she said. "He told me 'You know you weren't supposed to recover like this.'

"The doctors told him the odds were maybe 5 or 10 percent."

"It was a complete spinal cord injury," said Dr. David Bomback, one of the surgeons who operated on Tuffy.

But thanks to great medical care **from** start to finish, Tuffy, 45, of **Newtown**, has recovered almost completely **from** a fall that broke her **neck**.

She's back at work at Scholastic Inc. in Danbury, where she is senior director of Internet product development.

She's starting to run again. And while her once-fleet fingers are a bit slower at the computer keyboard, that skill is coming back as well.

"It's sort of amazing," she said.

Tuffy took part in a day-long seminar at Danbury Hospital last week featuring speakers **from** The Miami Project -- a team of doctors and nurses at the Miller School of Medicine at the University of Miami that now make up the largest and most comprehensive center for treating spinal cord injuries in the world.

Some of the things Tuffy's doctors did to help her were based on protocols established in Miami.

Tuffy was injured by a fall **from** a backyard hammock.

Having finished a big project at work, she had some colleagues over to her home to relax. She and a friend decided to share the hammock, which flipped over on them.

"She tumbled out and landed on her knees," Tuffy said of her friend. "I fell six inches. I broke my **neck**."

Immediately after she landed, Tuffy said, she lost all sensation in her limbs.

"I never lost consciousness," she said. "But I was kind of in a fog."

After an ambulance rushed her to Danbury Hospital, Bomback and his colleague, Dr. David Kramer -- the co-directors of the hospital's Spine Center -- took over her care.

Bomback said the vertebrae in the middle of Tuffy's **neck** were completely dislocated.

"It had reduced the space for the spinal cord by about 60 percent," he said.

After a CT scan showed the extent of her injuries, Bomback and Kramer decided to send her directly to surgery to relieve the pressure on her spinal cord rather than wait for an MRI.

"We had her in surgery within three hours of the accident," Kramer said.

Bomback first-realigned the vertebrae in Tuffy's **neck**, then stabilized them using orthopedic screws.

The team also gave her anti-inflammatory steroids to reduce the swelling in her injured spinal cord.

The surgery occurred in the early evening.

At 2 a.m., the first breakthrough occurred: Tuffy was able to wiggle her big left toe.

That meant her spinal cord, while injured, wasn't damaged beyond repair. It could send messages to her extremities.

"She had some clear sensations of feeling after the surgery," Bombback said. "But moving her toes was a good sign."

A few days later, Kramer performed a second surgery.

Operating **from** the front of her **neck**, he removed one of the discs in her **neck** -- again to create more space so that nothing was pressing on the spinal cord -- then fused two vertebrae in her **neck**.

Over the next few days, she also began to regain sensation in her arms and legs.

"I could move my left leg -- my right leg, not so good," she said. "I could move my right arm -- my left arm not so good. I couldn't move my hands or fingers. Fingers come back last."

After she had recovered **from** her two surgeries, Tuffy went to Gaylord Hospital in Wallingford, which specializes in physical rehabilitation and is one of 14 centers in the United States that specializes in treating spinal cord injuries.

She spent six weeks there. Within three days of arriving, they had her walking between parallel bars.

"That was monumental for me," Tuffy said. "It meant I knew I would recover."

Finally, while lying in bed, she got a wiggle out her left ring and middle fingers.

"But one day, I was lying in bed, thinking about moving my fingers. And they did," she said.

Thanks to the staff of Gaylord -- especially physical therapist Erin Prastine -- Tuffy made good progress.

Sometimes, she admits, while she was rehashing all the 16 individual things she needed to do to take a step, she wondered whether she'd ever walk again without thinking about all those different things.

"But of course, you do," she said.

Kramer and Bombback said one of the reasons Tuffy did so well is the speed and high quality of care she received -- **from** the ambulance team to the emergency room, to the surgery she received, to her physical therapy.

Also, her family was a tremendous help.

"She had a phenomenal support system," Kramer said. "You can't underestimate that."

Today, Tuffy said, she is fully functional.

Some days, she said, her fingers feel like rubber bands. Her right leg is still lagging behind her left in its recovery.

But compared to what could have been, her recovery is better and faster than anyone expected.

That's one of the reasons why she attended the Miami Project conference -- to spread the word.

"I want other people to get the same treatment," she said. "I hope some good will come out of it."

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