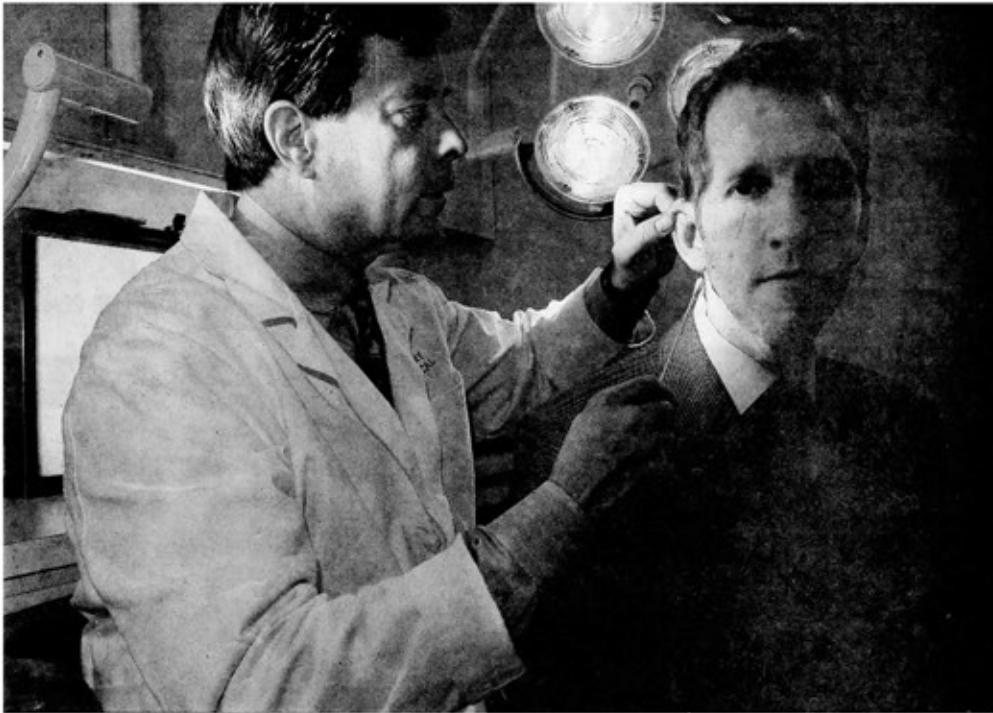


Blast victim gets help from town surgeon

By Michael Dinan / Staff Writer

Jason Pronyk can't remember exactly what happened inside Baghdad's Canal Hotel that sweltering Tuesday afternoon. Pronyk, 34, had been in Iraq one month as a program specialist with the U.N. Development Group. He thinks he was ordering coffee for seven colleagues at 4:30 p.m. on Aug. 19, 2003. He remembers opening a door for a hotel staff member and a truck bomb detonated outside the three-story building, killing 22 people and wounding more than 150 other. "Glass came like bullets.... It was a galaxy of glass and debris," Pronyk through a series of surgeries and a nine-month recovery program, mostly in his native Canada. Neurosurgeons extracted glass from the front of his brain and drained blood that had pooled inside his head. Glass, metal and other foreign matter remain lodged in his face, shoulder and chest. Eighteen screws hold his peripheral vision and feeling in his forehead. Pronyk, who returned in June to work at the United Nations in Manhattan, where he lives, met last month with Greenwich resident Dr. Darrick E. Antell, a plastic surgeon he was referred to by the U.N. Medical Service Department. Antell, 53, who practices mostly cosmetic surgery such as liposuction, face and neck lifts, and breast augmentation and reduction, will reattach a portion of Pronyk's ear that was severed in the bombing.



Dr. Darrick E. Antell looks at the damage done to Jason Pronyk's ear. Pronyk was injured in a bombing last year in Iraq.

Helen Neufsey / Staff photo

Surgery

Reconstructive surgery, though it makes up only 5 percent of Antell's business now, accounted for 95 percent when he started his practice more than 20 years ago.

"Reconstructive aspects are really at the foundation of plastic surgery," said Antell, who ran a burn unit in California and was on call for hospitals' emergency departments. "That's where we're all trained initially. A lot of people forget that because of the media and ladies' magazines."

Celebrity makeovers and television shows such as "Nip/Tuck," "The Swan," and "I Want a Famous Face" may focus attention on cosmetic procedures, another expert said, but the heart of plastic surgery lies elsewhere.

Modern plastic surgery started as reconstructive surgery for soldiers injured during World War I, said Dr. Joel Rein, Chief of Greenwich Hospital's plastic surgery section since 1978 and a former naval medical officer.

"Cosmetic plastic surgery has become so popular that people have stopped thinking about what the underlying principles are," said Rein, a 1963 graduate of Columbia University's College of Physicians & Surgeons.

"Plastic surgery actually started around 1929 following soldiers' injuries to the head and neck. In trench warfare, many soldiers looked up over the trenches and were hit in the face."

Plastic surgery has evolved since then to encompass vast and often overlooked contributions to general reconstructive surgery, Rein said. The first kidney transplant and procedures to reshape skulls damaged by birth defects, implant fingers and limbs lost in violent accidents and restore breasts following mastectomies all originated with plastic surgeons, he said.

"Foundations of reconstruction have always been the bedrock in plastic surgery principles," and Rein, a Greenwich resident. "What's happened since the 1980s is the principles of reconstruction have extended into the elective field."

Even so, traumatic repair surgery, like that for patients whose faces are mutilated in car accidents, remains a constant source of work for plastic surgeons, Rein said.

Antell said he treats all patients carefully, but especially so when they come to him as the victims of violent events or accidents

"As a surgeon, you're always taking into consideration the emotional needs as well as the physical," he said.

"With a violent accident of this type, it raises your antennae even more. Surprisingly, the patients I've met who were involved in this (bombing) are remarkably calm".

Pronyk is one of three U.N. employees injured in the blast that Antell has been hired to work on. Antell helped mend the facial scars of two others.

A diplomat with the American Board of Plastic Surgery, Antell has worked with several U.N. employees since befriending the head of its Medical Service Department several years ago.

For Pronyk, who also has consulted Antell about removing minute glass shards from under his eye, the surgery represents another small step back to his pre-bomb life.

"There's constant psychological processing," he said. "You hear lightning and you jump. There's a constant recollection. The surgery will hopefully restore the ear as close to pre-explosion as possible.... I have things I'm forced to live with and it doesn't seem to impair me. I live, work, and have resumed life as close to normal as possible."