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The surgery the doctor can't forget: Tom Hallman

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Dr. Mark Terry (Andie Petkus Photography)



By Tom Hallman Jr. | The Oregonian/OregonLive

Mark Terry wanted to be like his father, a doctor, while growing up. He asked him one day why he'd chosen to be a pediatrician. Nothing, his father explained, could compare to the reward of knowing he'd been able to help a child lead a healthy life.

As is so often the case with the young, Terry forgot his father's message. He forged his own path, one in medicine, but with the goal of being a cardiac surgeon. In medical school, after a rotation in ophthalmology, Terry decided to become an eye surgeon. Eventually, he became director of corneal services at Portland's Legacy Devers Eye Institute, a place where the majority of patients are in their late 60s or 70s.

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Then one day, Paxton Call, an 18-month-old boy destined to lead an isolated life, arrived at Terry's office. The family was out of options and Terry was their only remaining hope.

Terry remembered his father's words.

When he stepped into an examination room, Paxton, his youngest patient ever, became the one he would never forget.

Paxton was born in Idaho, where he lived with his parents and siblings. From birth, he had a rare eye problem that doctors had been unable to diagnose.

What Terry learned was the backs of the baby's corneas were defective. Instead of being clear, they were fogged, which made it difficult for the baby to see anything beyond a shape. Corneal blisters made his eyes feel as if they were continually being scratched.

"He was super light sensitive," said his mother, Brooke Call. "He closed his eyes in light because it was so painful. We didn't know if he could see shapes or images. The house lights had to be dim. He couldn't speak because he couldn't see our lips. Our sweet little boy struggled."

His parents had taken Paxton to numerous doctors, but they couldn't determine what could be wrong. They recalled one doctor treated Paxton's eyes for calcium deposits, using acid on the eyes and then scrapping away the deposits.

Nothing worked.

"It was hard on all of us," Call said. "We called Paxton the child who was an experiment. We kept fighting, but honestly we had no idea how much longer we could fight."

Out of desperation, an Idaho surgeon sent the family to Portland three years ago to consult with Terry, recognized as a pioneer in corneal issues.

The family's first impression did not go well.

"When we walked into Devers I saw a sign that said they specialized in geriatrics," Call said. "Here I am carrying my baby. I didn't have a lot of hope."

The one you can't forget

Everyone has something in their life they can't forget.

From time to time, over the rest of this year, I want to share those stories with readers. The memory could be a person or an experience.

Whatever the case, the memories become part of who you are. Write to me at thallman@oregonian.com. Tell me what you can't forget, and why.

What the family didn't know was that while Terry had brilliant surgical skills, he had something just as important.

"I have a special needs son," he said. "Nicholas has cerebral palsy. He's been in a wheelchair for 19 years, all of his life. I have a special place in my heart for families that have a child with a disability. I think I may understand their challenges better than most."

To examine, Paxton, Terry had to turn down the lights in the room.

"He was scared, in pain and functionally bilaterally blind," Terry said. "He sucked his thumb in a fetal position. He'd be blind the rest of his life and in pain because of the blisters."

Terry believed he, and his surgical team, could help, although they would be attempting a surgery never performed on a patient so young anywhere in the United States. The surgery, called selective endothelial transplantation, was developed in Terry's lab in 1997. Over the years, Terry and his team had trained surgeons worldwide. Years earlier, Terry had successfully performed the surgery on 7-year-old boy, a case that was written up in national medical journals.

But a baby?

Terry decided to replace the inner layer of the cornea with tissue to reduce swelling and lift the fog, allowing the baby to see clearly for the first time in his young life.

To find donor tissue, not easy for someone so small, a nationwide call went out through the Oregon Lions VisionGift program. It wasn't until the tissue was found that the surgery could proceed.



Paxton Call, right, with his younger brother.

"It was a long surgery," Call said. "I was so scared. I found out later there was a problem with the tissue. It was so small and would not lie flat. Instead of rushing, Dr. Terry took his time. We didn't know what to expect when the surgery was over."

Paxton's remained bandaged for 24 hours. He also had a metal plate under the bandage to prevent him from rubbing his eyes, and ripping free the cornea transplants.

"Even after everything was removed, Paxton wouldn't open his eyes," his mother said. "After all he'd been through, he was protecting himself.

And then, one day, the baby opened his eyes. At 21 months of age, he saw his parents for the first time.

He smiled," Terry said. "I'll never forget that moment. As a mom, I'd wondered if his eyes would look the same. They were clear. My sweet little boy's eyes were beautiful."

Back home in Idaho Falls, Paxton quickly became a different baby. He played with a toy train with his father, Chase. He interacted with his family. He liked being outside.

Terry said the case will forever resonate with him.

And not just what he did for Paxton.

Terry's father has been dead for decades, but the surgery reminded Terry of the powerful words wisdom, words of truth his father had passed onto his son so long ago.

"He was right," Terry said.

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