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Doc has hands of healing

Local News
By: Norma Connolly | norma@cfp.ky
05 December, 2010

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Dr. Alejandro Badia examines the arm of patient Ian Downing as physiotherapist Christine Gibbs looks on. - PHOTO: NORMA CONNOLLY

Dr. Alejandro Badia knows hands. He should, he has performed surgery on enough of them.

The Florida-based surgeon operates on the hands, fingers, upper limbs or shoulders of about 25 patients a week. He estimates that 30 per cent of his patients come from overseas and a majority of those are from the Cayman Islands.

On a recent visit to Cayman, the doctor combined follow-up consultations for patients with presentations of some of the latest in surgical techniques that he performs at his Badia Hand to Shoulder Center in Doral, Florida.

Ian Downing, who injured his arm while weight lifting, visited Badia in Miami on Tuesday, 16 November. Three days later, on 19 November, when Badia was in Cayman giving a presentation at A Step Ahead Physiotherapy in Governor's Square, he got his follow-up consultation.

"That's the thing about minimally invasive surgery, it's all so quick. I went for my first consultation on Monday, was operated on Tuesday and headed back to Cayman on Wednesday," Mr. Downing said.

He underwent a procedure involving the Platelet Rich Plasma therapy, in which the plasma is injected into the affected area to stimulate and enhance healing.

Another patient, Andy Scott, underwent more complicated surgery. He broke his finger when he slipped on stairs, but did not seek medical attention for three weeks because he thought he had merely sprained the finger.

His operation, done by Badia last month, entailed having a piece of bone from the back of his hand grafted onto his finger bones.

"It's surprising how injuring just one finger can put you out of commission. Things

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like tying your shoelace and buttoning your shirt become difficult,” Scott said as he waited for Badia to see him.

Badia said it was common for patients, like Scott, to fail to seek medical attention quickly, but this often led to complications.

“People need to understand that if they have an injury or problem, you take a big risk when you just assume it’s OK, that it will just get better. You have a window of opportunity. If I had seen [Scott] in the first week, it would have been a totally different operation,” the surgeon said.

Badia, who is chief of hand surgery at Baptist Hospital, works on a variety of hand, arm and shoulder problems, including carpal tunnel syndrome, nerve problems, arthritis, acute trauma and work- or sport-related injuries. He said many people do not realise that the pain they put up with on a daily basis can be rectified by treatment.

“There are lots of things we can do for people who have ailments they think they have to live with,” the doctor said.

The prevalence of Cayman Islands residents among his patients is not because people in Cayman were particularly clumsy or break more hands and arms than people in other places, but because he is often referred by patients in Cayman he has operated on or by doctors who have sent patients to him before.

The surgeon explained that he got into the specialised field of upper limbs while studying orthopaedics. “I realised that you could really get people better, you could make the most difference there,” he said.

But, he admitted, that when opting for his chosen field, he was probably thinking of his grandmother who suffered from crippling rheumatoid arthritis.

He recalled that when he was eight or nine years old, she went to see a hand surgeon in New York City in the 1970s, but because of insurance issues, she could not undergo the joint replacement surgery the surgeon recommended.

“I was very close to my grandmother. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I was drawn to this field because of her. She passed away when I was pre-med,” he said.

One of the most common injuries the surgeon deals with are wrist fractures, which often happen when a person tries to break their fall by putting their hands out in front of them.

Perhaps his most complicated surgery was the “re-re-attachment” of a woman’s arm. “Her arm had been ripped off in a motorcycle accident in Venezuela,” he recalled.

The woman’s arm had been initially reattached, but blood flow to the arm had eroded and infection set in, so he had to detach the arm and re-attach it again. “That surgery took 14 hours,” he said.

The surgeon insisted that the operations he performs work in tandem with rehabilitation and exercises the patients does after the surgery. “It’s a whole process. It’s a team approach. The physician has to work closely with the therapist, and luckily, there are a lot of good therapists in Cayman,” he said.

During his trip to Cayman, Badia met several of the physiotherapists who work with his patients.

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