

SKIN DEEP

Dermatologist saves limb & life of cancer patient

BY HEIDI EVANS
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WHEN Salvador Ponte noticed a rash on his leg, the Queens laborer figured it would go away and decided to forget about it. Until he couldn't.

By the time he hobbled into to Dr. Hooman Khorasani's skin cancer clinic at Mount Sinai Hospital on Sept. 23, 2011, the encrusted growth was like a red monster running from Ponte's ankle to his knee. It had been growing for almost 10 years.

"Oh my God, none of us had ever seen anything this big before, not even the chairman of the department," said Khorasani, the 37-year-old chief of Mohs reconstructive and cosmetic surgery, and one of the hospital's new superstars.

Ponte was told by several previous doctors that his lower leg would have to be amputated. They said the 18-inch long squamous cell carcinoma was just too large to cut out, and too much skin from his other leg would be needed to replace it.

A doctor at Elmhurst Hospital Center referred him to Khorasani.

"He saved my leg, he saved my life," said Ponte, 58, who recently got a clean bill of health during a follow-up visit. "It was a miracle. I feel like God touched me."

The eight-hour surgery was something out of a bionic movie.

Khorasani first excised the giant cancer from Ponte's leg.

Then, using a tissue graft made from the bladder of a pig known as "ACell," Khorasani poured a ground-up powder form of the tissue onto the wound. Then he sewed three layers of the porcine graft onto Ponte's leg.

Ponte returned two more times to have another pig bladder sheath sutured onto the open wound. The pig-extracted cells miraculously stimulate the immune system to grow new normal tissue.

"Once Ponte's own skin started to grow, we didn't need to do anything else," said Khorasani, who operates one of the few pro bono clinics in the New York area for patients without health insurance.

The hospital's dermatology department also submitted the unusual case to the Archives of Dermatology for publication.

"As far as anyone knows, this is the largest squamous cell carcinoma ever reported," said Khorasani.

His superiors sing Khorasani's praises.

"What really distinguishes him as a dermatological surgeon is the additional training he has in plastic surgery. He is just a superb surgeon," said Sinai's distinguished chief of the department, Dr. Mark Lebwohl. "His closures are just beautiful."

"I have never seen anybody like him, and we have had a string of superb Mohs surgeons here," added Lebwohl, who recruited the young surgeon from the University of Southern California. "He is a star."

You'd get no argument from Doris Holloway.

The 69-year-old retired singer from Washington Heights had tears in her eyes, describing Khorasani's warmth as well as his work. He practically rebuilt her entire nose.

"He is so sensitive, so caring and a perfectionist," said Holloway, who underwent Mohs surgery for squamous cell carcinoma. "When I was lying there, he just stroked my head and said, 'Don't worry, you'll be okay.' He's my hero."

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CANCER

Here are the top hospitals, in order, for cancer in the New York metro area. The number represents where they rank nationally.

- #2** Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center
- #22** New York-Presbyterian Hospital
- #35** Hackensack University Medical Center
- #38** NYU Langone Medical Center



Dr. Hooman Khorasani used pig tissue to save leg of Salvador Ponte, seen before skin cancer surgery.
Photo by Craig Warga/Daily News