



PHIL WILKINSON

Horses for courses Martin Kerswell and his team were among more than 160 competitors taking part in the annual Scottish ploughing championships in Kelso

Nerve grafted from ankle can restore feeling in patient's eyes

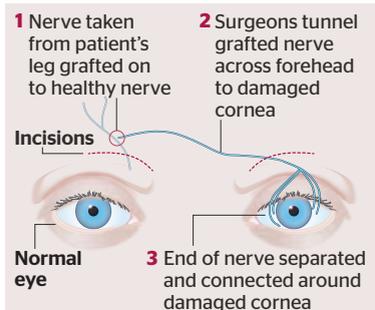
Kat Lay Health Correspondent

Surgeons at a British hospital are performing a ground-breaking operation to restore sensation in the eye by using a nerve taken from the ankle.

Thousands of people in the UK lack sensation in their cornea, putting them at risk of infection and blindness. The new surgery, performed on 13 patients to date, takes three consultant surgeons at Queen Victoria Hospital in East Grinstead, West Sussex, four hours. Within months, the patients regain feeling in their eyes.

The surgeons remove a nerve from the back of the patient's ankle to replace the nerve that is not working in the cornea. The ankle was chosen because most people do not miss sensation there, according to Raman Malhotra, the consultant oculoplastic surgeon who leads the team.

The nerve from the ankle is connected to a working nerve in the forehead, Mr Malhotra said. "If you think of it as



an electrical cable, we take the plastic sheath off to leave the wires exposed and connect them around the eye."

People can lose sensation in the eye after neurosurgery or infection by viruses such as herpes. About five people in 10,000 in Europe have the condition, meaning that 33,000 people in the UK may be affected. Because the body relies on nerve signals to stimulate repair, as well as on growth factors produced by nerves to heal, these

people are at risk of going blind.

A cut on the cornea can lead to ulcers that the eye cannot deal with, and patients' inability to feel when they get something in their eye raises the risk of infection. They have to use eye drops dozens of times a day and some have parts of their eyelids cauterised. Within months of the new surgery, patients can feel eyedrops going in, Mr Malhotra said. "Within six to 12 months, they start regaining sensation to the point we can touch one corner of their eye and they can feel it."

The hope is that patients will eventually regain all of the nerve's protective functions, whether or not sensation is fully restored. "It is phenomenal when you see how it can change people's lives," Mr Malhotra said.

The technique was developed in Canada for use in children and Mr Malhotra decided to bring it to the UK after he saw it presented at an international conference.

A growth factor recently approved by

the US Food and Drug Administration has also shown promise in restoring sensation to the eye. Mr Malhotra hopes that combining it with the surgery could bring even better results.

Kelly McColl, 24, from Rugby, had no feeling in her left cornea after having a dermoid cyst removed when she was a teenager. She said: "From that left eye, I have never been able to cry."

Her days were interrupted by the need to use eyedrops ten times a day. "It seems like a small thing, but that was the biggest impact — I'm a teacher... I don't have the time to step out and put eyedrops in all the time," she said.

Since she had the operation in February, Ms McColl has started to regain feeling, and has been thrilled at the lack of scarring. "That was one of my reservations," she said. "Am I going to have a massive scar across my eyelid?"

She now needs eyedrops only in the morning and evening, and said: "Hopefully in time there will be something there that will allow me to cry."

Trust wrong to sack surgeon who used untrained assistant

An eye surgeon who was fired after allowing an unqualified member of staff to help him with an operation to save a patient's sight has won his claim for unfair dismissal.

Tristan Reuser allowed Sarah Watson, a general support manager, to help when a nurse refused to take part at the last minute. Ms Watson had never helped in an operating theatre before, but used a retractor to hold the patient's eyelid open. The operation went smoothly and was successful.

Mr Reuser, a consultant ophthalmic surgeon with almost 20 years' service,

was fired for gross misconduct. An employment tribunal ruled that University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust's decision was wrong even though the patient had been put at "avoidable risk".

The trust said using an untrained assistant who had never scrubbed up before increased the risk of infection. She might not have been able to hold her hands steady, or might even have fainted. She could also have been unable to react appropriately should anything have gone wrong.

Mr Reuser said the unnamed patient

would have lost his sight had he not gone ahead. He had contacted Ms Watson to arrange alternative help. She said no-one else was available.

Mark Scriven, a vascular consultant who investigated on behalf of the trust, said cancelling the operation would have been "simple common sense".

In a written ruling, Robin Broughton, an employment judge, said: "The claimant acknowledged these risks before me."

However, the judge said: "On the evidence I heard, cancelling the operation was likely to lead to serious and

permanent deterioration in the patient's sight."

After a second incident when he left a trainee unsupervised to finish cataract operations, Mr Reuser was sacked.

Despite winning his case, the judge said: "The claimant's failings were significant and serious. As serious as the failings of the respondent. He subjected patients to avoidable risk in relation to both allegations. In those circumstances I consider that the claimant contributed 50 per cent to his dismissal."

Mr Reuser and the trust were given 28 days to agree a settlement.

Quintagram® No 206

Solve all five clues using each letter underneath once only

1 Fearless (4)

— — — —

2 Judicial arena (5)

— — — — —

3 Become used up (3,3)

— — — — —

4 At a loss, perplexed (7)

— — — — —

5 Digit (10)

— — — — —

B	C	D	D	E	E	E	F
F	G	I	L	M	N	N	O
O	O	O	P	R	R	R	R
S	T	T	T	U	U	U	U

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Diabetes 'need not kill'

About 500 people with diabetes die every week in England and Wales, and many deaths could be prevented, according to Diabetes UK. Better care could reduce diabetes-related strokes and heart attacks, the charity said. Chris Askew, its chief executive, said the statistics, based on the NHS National Diabetes Audit report, were "harrowing" and funding for care improvements should continue beyond next year. About 3.5 million people in the UK have had diabetes diagnosed.

Fourth Scrabble title

A miserable word helped to put a smile on the face of Nigel Richards, 51, as it won him his fourth World Scrabble Championship. A New Zealander based in Malaysia, he played "groutier" — more sullen or sulky — to clinch victory at the event in Westfield London. It scored 68 points, giving him a 575 to 452 win over Jesse Day of California.

Veteran's poppy power

A 103-year-old World War Two veteran has been hailed as Britain's oldest poppy seller. Wally Randall has been selling poppies for the Royal British Legion in Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire, since the early 1950s and will return to his patch inside Wilko's store, which keeps him supplied with tea. "I like to do my little bit to help the heroes, he said.

Errors led to girl's death

Royal Cornwall Hospitals NHS Trust has apologised to the family of Coco Bradford, aged six, from St Ives, for "a series of failures in care and missed opportunities" before she died from sepsis last year. The trust accepted a report that asked for 13 changes in procedure. Coco's mother, Rachel, said: "Our beautiful little girl did not stand a chance."

Soap story saves man

A grandmother used advice from *Coronation Street* to save a man who had been stabbed in the chest. Gillian Edmondson, 57, remembered a character being told to put pressure on a wound and did so for Martin Parkinson, who is stable in hospital, for 25 minutes before an ambulance arrived in Carnforth, Lancashire. Police are investigating.