

## Orthopaedic Connection

### An Orthopaedic Surgery Christmas Story

By Thomas J. Haverbush, M.D.

#### *Transforming patient information into patient understanding.*

All of us have memories of Christmases past, mostly joyous and some not so happy.

A Christmas etched indelibly in my memory happened in Cleveland where I was in practice before I moved to Michigan. It is as clear to me as if it happened yesterday. It is a story of unspeakable horror, saving a life, but not a limb and ultimate triumph of a patient and family over a devastating injury.

Orthopaedic Surgeon's lives are not on the same track as other people as you will see when you read on.

It was the Night Before Christmas at 11 P.M. The phone rang and it was Ron, a resident at St. Vincent Charity Hospital in downtown Cleveland. I was "on call" for the Emergency Room. It was snowing. The weather was awful. In other words it was a dark and stormy night.

Ron told me that the ambulance had just brought in a man in his 30's who was from Eastern Europe. He was going to midnight Mass with his family at his church in downtown Cleveland. He had gotten out of his car on a busy street and been run over by a passing truck. He was horribly injured and Ron added, "Doc, I was in Vietnam and I have never seen anything like this". Gulp!

By the time I arrived at Charity Hospital the patient was already in the operating room with tubes coming out of everywhere. A scene straight out of television.

Ivan's (his real name) right leg had been mangled and nearly amputated above the knee. Bleeding was profuse. He was in shock. Many other injuries were present as well. The leg could not be saved. I amputated it in the mid thigh. His condition was finally stabilized and other less drastic injuries were treated.

As I finished I asked where his family was and I was told they were in the main lobby. I wasn't prepared for what followed. I went downstairs with a nurse. In the lobby there must have been everyone

from Ivan's church. I located his wife and told her I thought he would live, but his right leg was amputated above the knee.

She could barley speak English, but when the people crowding around his wife and me heard the horrible news everyone started crying, sobbing and shouting in Slovenian. It was heart wrenching to see such a night of joyous celebration of Christ's birth turn into such a scene of tragedy and devastation. I asked myself how something so cruel could happen.

Ivan was in the hospital for weeks as you can imagine. We became good friends. His community raised a lot of money to help him out as he had a wife and two small children. I remember donating all the money I got for the surgery to his rescue fund. He eventually got his artificial leg and was able to walk again. He was never able to return to his factory work, but went through rehab and found a sedentary job he was able to do to support his family.

We could not save his leg, but we saved his life which is the most important.

I have long since lost track of Ivan, but I always remember at this time of year the horrible tragedy that turned into a triumph of medical care and the unwavering support and dedication of his family and church.

Orthopaedic trauma surgery is big boy surgery for sure. It is not for the faint of heart. There have been countless similar cases over the years that I have operated on, but this case I will remember as long as I live because it was on Christmas Eve when things like this are not supposed to happen.

Merry Christmas everyone.

Be careful going to church. I hope you never end up in my operating room on Christmas Eve!

I am looking forward to being with you for a wonderful 2011.

Good health. Good life.

Be well. Love and best wishes,

Dr. Haverbush

