



Prosthetic and Orthotic Care, Inc.

In the News.....

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Paraplegic hopes stem cell surgery works Teenage girl aims to walk unassisted

**BY JENNIFER A. BOWEN
News-Democrat**

The 18-year-old paraplegic had waited months for her new leg braces, a pair of specially designed ones that she hopes will help her walk and persuade the new stem cells in her spinal cord to grow stronger.

Last week, Jacki Rabon of Waverly, Ill., was in Fairview Heights for the final fitting of a pair of \$9,000 leg braces from Prosthetic and Orthotic Care Inc., another step in the journey she hopes will end with walking unassisted again.

"This is what I've been looking forward to," Rabon said as her new braces were strapped to her legs over a pair of blue jeans. "It seemed like it took forever to get to this point. The hardest part (of physical therapy) has been learning things that I already knew before the accident and learning how to do them all over again. Balance has been the biggest thing."

Rabon lost all movement and feeling in her body from the waist down when she broke her back and damaged her spinal cord in a car accident on Aug. 12, 2003. Doctors put her in a wheelchair and told the former varsity volleyball player she would never walk again.

The vibrant, determined athlete decided she would walk again and was willing to try an experimental stem cell transplant surgery in a foreign country, just for the chance to stand.

The Rabon family first heard about the experimental procedure while watching a PBS special called "The Miracle Cell," and Jacki Rabon knew she wanted to give it a try. The journey from learning about the procedure to landing in Portugal for the surgery took almost two years as the family worked to raise money to get there.

"I've always said I would walk again, and I really wanted to have the surgery done," Rabon said. "I had heard stories of good results and I figured if I never tried it, I'd never know."

The \$47,000 procedure, known as an olfactory mucosal transplantation, involved removing undeveloped nerve cells from the olfactory bulb in Rabon's nose, convincing them to become spinal cord nerve cells instead of olfactory cells, and transplanting them into the damaged area of her spinal cord.

Dr. Carlos Lima performed the experimental surgery in October in Lisbon, Portugal. Rabon joined 45 others who have had the surgery since its development in 2002.

The surgery is not performed in the United States, and health insurance does not cover the costs. Donations and fundraisers raised more than \$50,000 and helped Rabon and her mother, Becki Rabon, get to Portugal and pay for the surgery.

"If the U.S. would invest more money into spinal cord injury research, people like Jacki wouldn't have to go to other countries to get help," Becki Rabon, Jacki's mother, said. "This surgery should be available here, but it's not, and that's sad. The surgery was very painful for her, but when we thought about the outcome, it was worth it."



Prosthetist Jon Wilson watches Jacki Rabon walk.

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The new cells seem to be working so far, but it's hard to know whether the tingling Rabon feels in her legs is because of her new nerve cells, because of the two hours of rehabilitation she does every day, or a combination of both.

Rabon smiled as she grabbed onto a pair of bars, slowly pulled herself into a standing position from her wheelchair, and concentrated to use the new braces to help her take two slow steps forward.

"The pain is a good thing," she commented. "It means it's starting to work."

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