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Iraqi asylum seeker turned-surgeon helps Australia's war-wounded walk again.

Business topics

By Health View

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Dr Munjed Al Muderis arrived in Australia as a refugee from Iraq. The orthopaedic surgeon now has three clinics in Sydney. Using a high-tech procedure called osseointegration that uses robotic attachments in place of amputees' missing limbs, he's transforming the lives of war veterans, motor accident survivors and Paralympians.

Dr Munjed Al Muderis was raised in upper-middle-class comfort in Iraq. Two years after finishing his medical degree at Baghdad University and fearing for his own safety he urgently fled his homeland.

If the asylum seeker was under the impression his background, English language skills and medical qualifications would result in special treatment he was quickly disabused of such notions. After reaching Malaysia via Abu Dhabi, he boarded a packed boat headed for Christmas Island. He soon ended up in the Curtin Detention Centre. There he spent 10 months, referred to by the name 'Number 982', before being granted asylum.

He was ultimately accepted as a bona fide refugee but with his qualifications not recognised in Australia. Undaunted, he studied hard to pass his exams then worked throughout regional Australia as a doctor and surgical registrar.

A high-tech solution

Osseointegration emerged, inspired by dental implants, in Sweden in 1995. It essentially involves putting a robotic attachment (think a high-tech prosthetic) where the end of an amputee's leg or arm used to be. Al Muderis, who'd developed a fascination with human robotics as a child through movies, had long been interested in the possibilities opened up by osseointegration so he went to Sweden and Germany to learn from the best. Then he set about making the procedure more widely available, transforming the lives of many war veterans, motor accident survivors and Paralympians in the process.

"Ford didn't invent the automobile but he did invent the production line that made it available to the masses," says Dr Al Muderis. "Likewise, I've tried to make this procedure easier and more accessible through adopting technology such as 3D printing and plasma spray with bacteria repellents. I've also modified the technique to make the implant-bone connection more integrated. With my technique, the implant comes out of the body in a more seamless way. It's part of the body meaning there's minimal chance of rejection or infection."

These days, when Dr Al Muderis heads overseas, it's to teach surgeons. He now has three clinics in his adopted hometown of Sydney, one at Norwest Private Hospital, one at Macquarie University and one at



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Sydney Adventist Hospital. All are considered worldwide centres of excellence and Prince Harry visited the Macquarie University clinic in 2015.

“Prince Harry wanted to come because he’s an ambassador for injured soldiers. I’ve operated on nine British soldiers who came to Sydney to see me,” says Dr Al Muderis. All of them had lost limbs in the country I’m originally from.”

The doctor who changes an arm and a leg

Dr Al Muderis has now transformed the lives of more than 200 patients including soldiers who’ve lost both legs and were allowed to walk again. Still in his his early 40s, he’s just getting started.

“There are two types of evolution happening in medicine: one’s driven by stem cells and one by mechanical technology,” he says. “Technology is moving fast [and] I want to use it to allow the disabled to lead as normal a life as possible.

“One of the developments I find most exciting involves creating exoskeletons, controlled by brain signals. These can be fitted to paraplegics and quadriplegics, who would then regain the ability to walk. That might seem unimaginable. But so were robotic arms that could be moved just through the thoughts of the person they were attached to back when I started working in this field. Maybe it will be 20 years until these exoskeletons exist, maybe only five.”

As would be expected for a man of his talents, Dr Al Muderis hasn’t been short of international job offers. They have never tempted him. “This country gave me everything. I’m not going to leave it, especially now that I’m in a position to give back.”

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