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New technology provides man with hope

■ Damion Cummins now can move his right hand, arm.

By BRIAN SERAILE
The Times

For six years, Damion Cummins couldn't grasp or reach with his right arm or hand.

But now, thanks to a device placed in his chest, he can put on his own hat.

That was a feat Cummins demonstrated during a news conference Friday, showing the progress he has made

since surgery in January.

Cummins, who was injured while playing football six years ago, is one of eight people in the country to undergo the surgery.

The device in his chest enables him to grasp, hold and release objects of various sizes and weights.

"It has helped my independence a lot," Cummins said, joking that he didn't put the hat all the way on his head because he didn't want to mess up his hair. "Before, I had to have someone help put on a brace or hold something for me so I could grab on to it. Now, I can do it myself."

Cummins was paralyzed from the chest down during a football game Sept. 23, 1992, when he was 15. He was selected as a candidate for the prosthetic device because he fit criteria that included having some flexibility in his elbow.

"He's done very well," said Dr. John Knight, who implanted the device and is founder of the Louisiana Hand & Upper Extremity Institute. "He's quick to learn."

Knight implanted a stimulator in Cummins' chest and eight flexible electrodes on Cummins' hand and forearm muscles. The electrodes are

connected to the stimulator, and Cummins can initiate electrical signs that cause the muscles to contract for a functional hand grasp.

The doctor said he is pleased with Cummins' progress, which has been so good he will attend an international conference for hand surgeons at the end of this month.

Knight said additional surgery will "fine tune" the whole procedure. "The whole goal is for us to get him out of the brace. We will go in and reroute a couple tendons so he can be completely out of the brace."

The surgery is a milestone for Cummins and for Willis-Knighton Medical Center, the only facility in the southwest and south central United States offering the technology.

In two weeks, Cummins finishes his sophomore year at Northeast Louisiana University, where he is studying psychology and takes a tape recorder to class along with someone who takes notes for him.

"I haven't been able to take notes yet because my writing is kind of slow," Cummins said. But he's optimistic because he said his writing is steadily getting better.



The Times/TIM LOEHRKE

Damion Cummins, 20, now can grasp items with his right hand.