



Times photos by Roxana Vasquez, rvasquez@stcloudtimes.com

Cheryl Wensmann and Dr. John Houle discuss a procedure called Deep Inferior Epigastric Perforator (DIEP) flap for breast reconstruction that uses the body's own tissue instead of implants Thursday at Midsota Plastic Surgeons.

A NATURAL DECISION

A MICROSURGERY OPTION FOR BREAST RECONSTRUCTION
LETS WOMEN USE TISSUE FROM THEIR OWN BODIES

By Frank Lee
felee@stcloudtimes.com

After their mastectomies, Pamela Mason and Cheryl Wensmann decided to go “au naturel.”

The breast cancer survivors had breast reconstruction surgery using tissue from their own bodies rather than something artificial and man-made inserted like silicone or saline breast implants.

“I was preparing to have an implant — I had an expander already in my chest and was getting ready for surgery — and a friend of mine who had the (DIEP) surgery done told me about it,” said Mason, who eventually went to Midsota Plastic Surgeons in St. Cloud for reconstruction surgery.

DIEP stands for “deep inferior epigastric perforator” — the name of the main blood vessel that runs through the tissue that is used to reconstruct the breast. In DIEP flap reconstruction, skin, fat and blood vessels — not muscle — are removed from the lower belly.

“I knew that an implant or prosthesis is not necessarily permanent. They can wear out and you could have to have it done again, where this is my own flesh and it's a one-shot deal hopefully,” said Mason, a 61-year old from Lake Shore

Microsurgery

Because no abdominal muscle is removed, most

women recover more quickly and have a lower risk of losing abdominal muscle strength, and there also tends to be less abdominal wall discomfort, according to breastcancer.org, a nonprofit organization.

“With a DIEP flap reconstruction, you can get a tummy tuck because they use that tissue to form the new breast tissue ... and it results in a more natural look,” said Wensmann, a 60-year-old from Sartell who works at St. Cloud Hospital in surgery. “My scarring was very minimal.”

Wensmann went to Midsota Plastic Surgeons on 12th Street North for DIEP breast reconstruction surgery. She had DIEP flap surgery done the same day she had a bilateral mastectomy.

“As far as I know, the Mayo Clinic is the only other place in Minnesota that does (DIEP), and only about 40 surgeons nationwide — myself included — perform this operation regularly,” said Dr. John Houle, a plastic surgeon who operated on Mason and Wensmann.

DIEP flap is more complex than TRAM (or transverse rectus abdominis myocutaneous) flap, which requires the removal of muscle along with fat, skin and blood vessels. Because DIEP requires a plastic surgeon highly skilled in microsurgery there are not many surgeons who do it

“It's also more labor intensive, and it's also kind of more of a time commitment, and so a lot of people

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Pamela Mason

DIEP, CONTINUED ON PAGE 12 ►

DIEP, CONTINUED FROM
PAGE 9 ►

choose not to do it. The microsurgeon has to operate through the microscope — and it's doable — but it's something you have to have specialized training for,” Houle said.

“When you move the tissue from the abdomen to the chest, you have to re-establish circulation to it, so you do that by dissecting off this artery and vein in the abdomen and then you sew that to an artery and vein in the chest, and those blood vessels are about 2 mm in diameter.”

Costs

An elliptical-shaped area of tissue is removed from just above the belly button down to just above the pubic region in DIEP flap breast reconstruction surgery.

“Tissue can also be taken from the buttock or thigh if the abdomen isn't a very good option ... people who don't have enough extra tissue in the abdomen (for DIEP),” Houle said.

Houle said DIEP is a little more expensive in the short term than breast reconstruction using implants but that the long-term costs for peace of mind outweigh the financial concerns.

“At Midsota, we're large enough where we can have one person who is more committed to doing DIEP, whereas if you were in private practice by yourself, you might choose not to do it because it's not necessarily the most cost-efficient or best reimbursement for your time,” he said.

Mason said, “To put a bra on or a swimsuit, you just can't tell the difference that anything has been done, and I can't tell you how wonderful that's been. It's my own flesh and it looks just normal, and I told Dr. Houle he gave me back my femininity. I could not be more grateful.”