



ROYAL AUSTRALASIAN COLLEGE OF SURGEONS

MEDIA RELEASE

Limb sacrifice or salvage? The changing nature of battlefield injuries and treatment

Friday 7 May, 2010

The nature of injuries being sustained on the battlefield, and the surgical techniques used to treat these injuries, are changing constantly, delegates to the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons' 79th Annual Scientific Congress (ASC) have been told.

Dr Peter Sharwood, a Brisbane based orthopaedic surgeon who also holds the rank of colonel in the Australian army, said there has been an historic precedent for limb sacrifice as a life saving procedure in battle casualties.

In more recent conflicts however, and especially in the war against terror, the improvised explosive device and small arms projectiles produce the vast majority of injuries. The use of body armour is also thought to be a factor in altering the pattern of modern injuries, such that extremity injuries and burns account for at least half of the wounds seen.

“With modern surgical techniques of limb salvage, damage control surgery, and the advent of level 1 trauma care at the battle front, the trend is now to attempt to save limbs which in previous conflicts would have been sacrificed,” Dr Sharwood said.

“In fact, the situation is now emerging, with the advent of highly sophisticated prostheses, where patients with limbs that have been ‘saved’ are now requesting amputation.”

Dr Sharwood noted that during current conflicts United States military surgeons had dealt with fewer than 1,000 amputations, but an increasing number of patients are double, triple and even quadruple amputees.

Dr Sharwood's presentation to delegates examined what prostheses and rehabilitation services are now being offered by the US and Great Britain to their injured soldiers.

Dr Sharwood's presentation is one of hundreds at this year's ASC, covering all surgical specialties and aspects of surgical history and education. Nearly 2,000 delegates are expected to attend the ASC, which runs from 4 to 7 May and is being held at the Perth Convention Exhibition Centre. The ASC program is available online at www.surgeons.org

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