



Something FROM Nothing

How a **WORLD-CLASS** neuroscience department comes about and benefits the local community

When Jason Edwards woke up at Cape Fear Valley Medical Center last September, he didn't have a clue how he got there. All he remembered was jogging the day before and now he was super late for work. He tried to get out of bed to take a shower, but his wife wouldn't let him. Nor would the doctor or nurses at his bedside.

The 41-year-old English teacher had actually lost eight days of his life recovering in intensive care, in and out of consciousness. And he wasn't late for work. He was lucky to be alive. Really lucky.

Investigators believe the avid jogger was the victim of an early morning hit-and-run near his house. Doctors had to remove part of his skull to relieve the massive pressure built up around his brain due to pooled blood.

The skull section would have normally been stored in a medical storage facility for later reinsertion, but Edwards' surgeon did something clever: he placed the bone in the patient's stomach for safekeeping instead.

Three months later, the surgeon, Inad Atassi, M.D., put the skull bone back where it belonged with the help of titanium screws.

Edwards has since returned to work and resumed his normal life. Even the hair cut from his scalp before surgery has filled back in nicely.

“It took some convincing that I was even hit by a car and had surgery,” Edwards said, “but Dr. Atassi saved my life.”

The Syrian-born neurosurgeon is a bit more modest. He says he did what any surgeon would have done, given the circumstances.

“We didn’t have a storage facility,” he said. “If you anticipate the patient recovering, then it’s always better to use his own bone instead of a titanium plate.”

Dr. Atassi has been practicing neurosurgery long enough to learn a few tricks of his particularly skilled trade. He started his medical career in 1980 performing neurosurgery at Cape Fear Valley Medical Center and what-was-then called Highsmith-Rainey Memorial Hospital.

His list of professional achievements include being the first in the state to perform laser disc surgery and the first in southeastern North Carolina to use lasers for brain surgery, both during the mid 1980s. He eventually left the operating room to become a medical consultant, but missed practicing medicine.

Today, Dr. Atassi is Medical Director for Cape Fear Valley Neuroscience Center and his job is to spread the gospel about the center’s neurology and neurosurgery services – as well as to practice what he preaches.

“We’ve come a long way since 2008,” Dr. Atassi said. “We didn’t even have any physicians. Today we’re a full-scale practice performing every type of neurosurgery procedure available.”

The Neuroscience Center includes four neurosurgeons and four neurologists, with patients from across the U.S. and internationally. The physicians’ specialties range from neurointerventional procedures and aneurysm treatment to neurosurgical pain management and spine surgery.



Jason Edwards



Inad Atassi, M.D.

The skills set is so adept that state regulators cleared the way for Cape Fear Valley Medical Center to begin practicing as a Level III-designated trauma center in 2011. Neuroscience Center physicians provide round-the-clock coverage for the trauma program.

The capability allows more critically injured patients to stay in the area instead of being flown to other hospital trauma centers. Cape Fear Valley treats trauma patients from Cumberland, Sampson, Bladen, Hoke and Harnett counties.

The Neuroscience Center’s success in a relatively short time hasn’t gone unnoticed. In March, *Becker’s Hospital Review* named the program to its “100 Hospitals with Great Neurosurgery and Spine Programs” list. The publication’s editorial team chose winners based on industry nominations, clinical accolades, quality of care and other criteria.

Cape Fear Valley Neuroscience Center was specifically cited for its four full-time neurosurgeons, who “offer some of the most expansive treatments in the Fayetteville area for brain tumors, aneurysms, spine trauma, complex spine disorders, neurosurgical pain management, movement disorders and epilepsy, among others.”

The award is prestigious but has little meaning to a patient lying in intensive care fighting for his life. Only actions do.

Just ask Edwards.

“I’m just ready to start jogging again,” he said. “I miss going out in the mornings and jogging. It’s 40 to 45 minutes of alone time from everything. Dr. Atassi has helped me regain my life.”