



# Changing faces and lives

**F**acelifts and boob jobs are part and parcel of Ravi Mahajani's job, but he says only a tiny fraction of his work is "purely cosmetic", with most cases, including breast augmentations and tummy tucks, containing a medical element.

In a world of fast-evolving technology, and an industry with fuzzy rules on specific regulation, he warns Territorians to ensure the facility and medical professionals conducting their surgery are registered and accredited.

**D**r Mahajani once made a woman a new oesophagus out of her thigh.

"One of my colleagues took out the cancer from her oesophagus and we reconstructed a pipe for her," he said.

"It was about an eight-hour operation, here in Darwin.

"The role of a plastic surgeon is reconstruction — we deal with things like skin cancers, hand surgery, reconstruction after trauma or burns, or cancer, including breasts."

## A Territory plastic surgeon rebuilds hands mangled in workplace accidents and faces injured in car crashes; he removes skin cancers, and repairs people whose bodies have been attacked by flesh-eating diseases

STORY ELLIE TURNER PICTURES PATRINA MALONE

The history of plastic surgery is parallel to the history of war.

"If you look at the wars in the 19th century, with big weapons like cannons people would get badly injured and they would die — from infection or the lack of blood transfusion," Dr Mahajani said.

"Then in WWI, with the invention of machine guns alongside advances in medicine — transfusions and antibiotics — we were saving maimed people's lives.

"So what do you do with someone who has a massive facial defect or no hand, living with huge functional problems from disfigurement?"

"We had to rebuild them. Over the years reconstruction became more advanced, so we had better microscopes to be able to transplant one part of your body with an artery and vein and put it on another part of your body.

"Now we can make breasts out of people's tummies, reconnect nerves."

Dr Mahajani's subspecialty is hand surgery, from dealing with elective "cold cases" such as carpal tunnel to emergency reconstructions, including one man whose hand was all but ripped off in an ore crusher.

It resembled a lump of raw meat when he was brought into surgery.

"The fingers weren't

attached, so we made him an index finger using microsurgery and made a pincher-grip for him, then buried his hand in his groin to resurface the skin," he said.

"(The success of) surgery has many factors — time frame, condition of the amputate, the health of the patient."

He said advances in modern medicine had been phenomenal, but one particular medieval method was still useful, especially when reattaching fingers.

"The blood is pumped in by an artery, but sometimes there is no vein to drain back the blood, or you can't put a vein graft in, so you can use a leech," he said.

At the other end of the scientific spectrum, professionals can grow one-size-fits-all artificial skin in a lab.

Dr Mahajani has crafted a woman a new vagina, fully functioning, post-cancer.

He can make a nose on a person's forearm and transplant it onto their face.

A little girl had exposed bone on her forearm after being run over by a tractor, so he attached her forearm to her leg, allowing the skin to grow over the wound for three weeks, to prevent amputation.

Dr Mahajani, one of two plastic surgeons based in the NT, does 50 per cent of the on-call jobs for Royal Darwin Hospital and helps work

through the ever-mounting list of public surgeries.

He also works from clinics Northern Plastic Surgery, in Wanguri, and Darwin Day Surgery, at Parap, and does surgeries at Darwin Private Hospital.

"Private health cover is very important, full stop, because it protects you," he said.

"Every time you get a car you pay out third party insurance and we don't do it for ourselves?"

"It's not saying things will go wrong, but things do go wrong — accidents happen — and it's especially important in Darwin because we only have the one public hospital and it does get busy.

"They do a fantastic job looking after things like trauma, so elective surgeries go on the backburner."

Darwin born and raised, with a father who was a general surgeon, Dr Mahajani left home at 17 to study medicine in Adelaide.

He finished his degree and pursued his dad's career path, doing a one-year residency under the wing of respected surgeon Professor Phillip Carson in Darwin.

"General surgery fell out of my interest sphere and plastic