

Watch Your Fingers

In the Outpatient Clinic

One thing I like about physical medicine and rehabilitation is that there are few emergencies. For the most part, traumatic events already have occurred, and I can work at a leisurely pace to aid in recovery.

One afternoon, a small, middle-aged man was slumped unresponsive in his wheelchair while waiting to see one of my partners, who was not immediately available. My secretary and I lifted him onto the examination table. He appeared not to be breathing. I tilted his head back, then pulled down on his lower jaw, thinking about my ABCs (airway, breathing, circulation). I hooked my fingers over his lower teeth to pull more forcefully. He awakened and immediately began to thrash around. I felt a quick, sharp pain and withdrew my finger.

"You're bleeding," said my secretary, handing me a washcloth. I grasped my finger with the other hand and continued to watch the patient, who was now sitting up. I spotted a smooth, round blob on the patient's lower lip.

"Could I have my finger back?" I asked.

The man's wife handed the piece of my finger to my secretary, who then paged my partner. "He bit Dr. Kienker's finger off," I heard her saying.

I was taken to the emergency department (ED), and the patient was placed next door to me in the ED

a few minutes later. The ED doctor had searched the patient's mouth and found no additional finger fragments.

My hand was X-rayed, and to my surprise, the bone at the end of my distal phalanx was missing. At this point, my injury was becoming painful and I was given intravenous morphine. This allowed me to watch calmly as the hand surgeon removed my fingernail, snipped off the end of the bone, and trimmed the tissue to make a smooth fingertip. He took the skin from the tissue fragment and made a cap, which he sewed onto my fingertip. Then, he sewed the fingernail back on. My finger was wrapped and splinted. I missed the afternoon of work but was back to work the next day.

In subsequent weeks, the cap of skin on my fingertip peeled off, but new skin had formed underneath. My fingernail fell off, and a new fingernail has taken its place. I am left with a right index finger that is $\frac{1}{8}$ in shorter than the left one, with a slightly numb and hypersensitive tip.

Now, when I have a patient with chest pain or difficulty breathing, in addition to "airway, breathing, circulation," I tell myself, "Watch your fingers!"

—Karen Kienker, MD
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