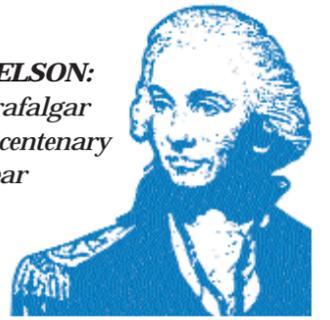
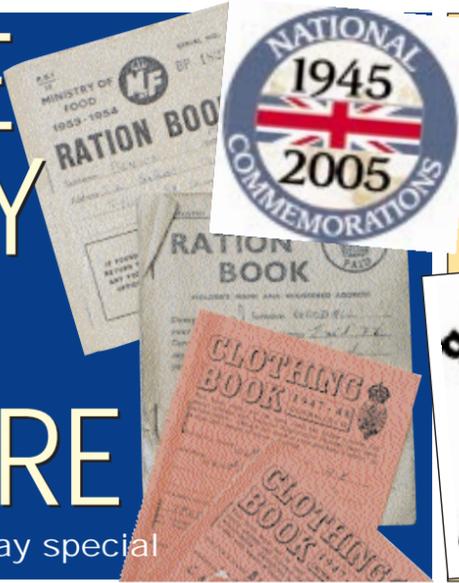


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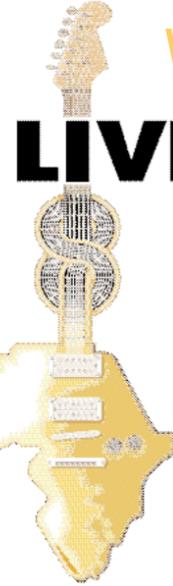


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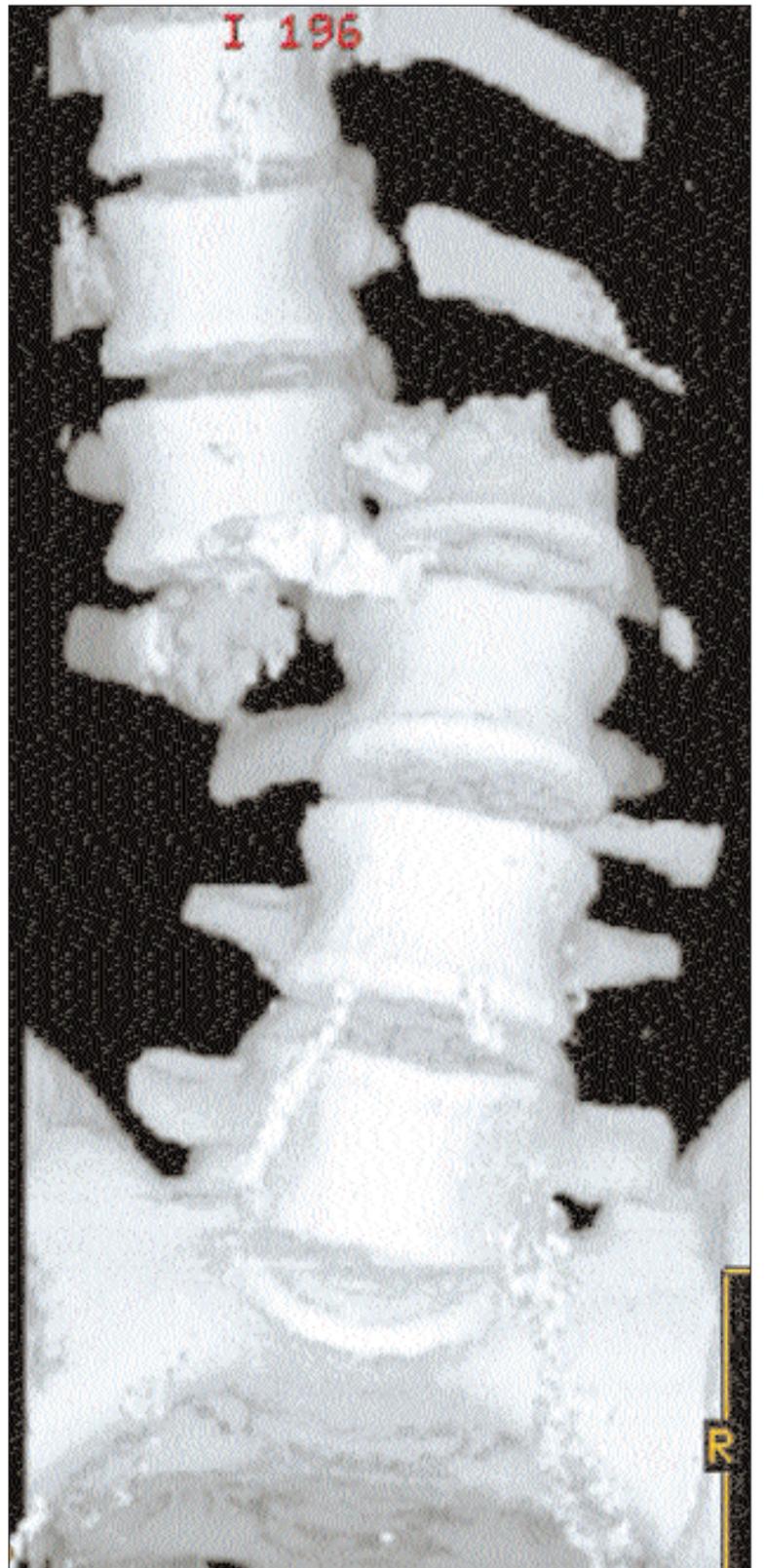
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Pages 32-33



Crash victim walking again only two weeks after horrific injury

NORFOLK SPINE-OP MIRACLE



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This is the shattered spine of 25-year-old Matthew Hunt - injuries suffered after he was catapulted around the inside of his car after it left the road as he drove to work one morning.

Amazingly, two weeks after being rushed to hospital he was able to walk again, thanks to a stroke of miraculous good fortune and the skills of a Norfolk surgeon.

He knows his injuries would not have been as serious if he had been wearing his seatbelt.

And now the surgeon from the Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital who saved him from paralysis, Am Rai, has spoken of his fears that more young people are risking paralysis and death by flouting the seatbelt laws.

These are concerns echoed by Norfolk police and the East Anglian Ambulance Trust.

Mr Rai said: "My impression is that we are getting an increase in young people with significant injuries because they are not wearing seatbelts.

"It is almost certain that if

By MARK NICHOLLS
Health correspondent

they were wearing a seatbelt they would not have this type of injury.

"Wearing a seatbelt would reduce certain injuries, particularly a fracture dislocation of the spine."

Matthew, from Harleston, had a six-hour operation where his spine was realigned and a "cage" built around the break while it heals.

Mr Rai, who also practises at the Norwich Bupa Hospital, said it was extremely rare that a patient who suffers such extensive spinal damage is not paralysed.

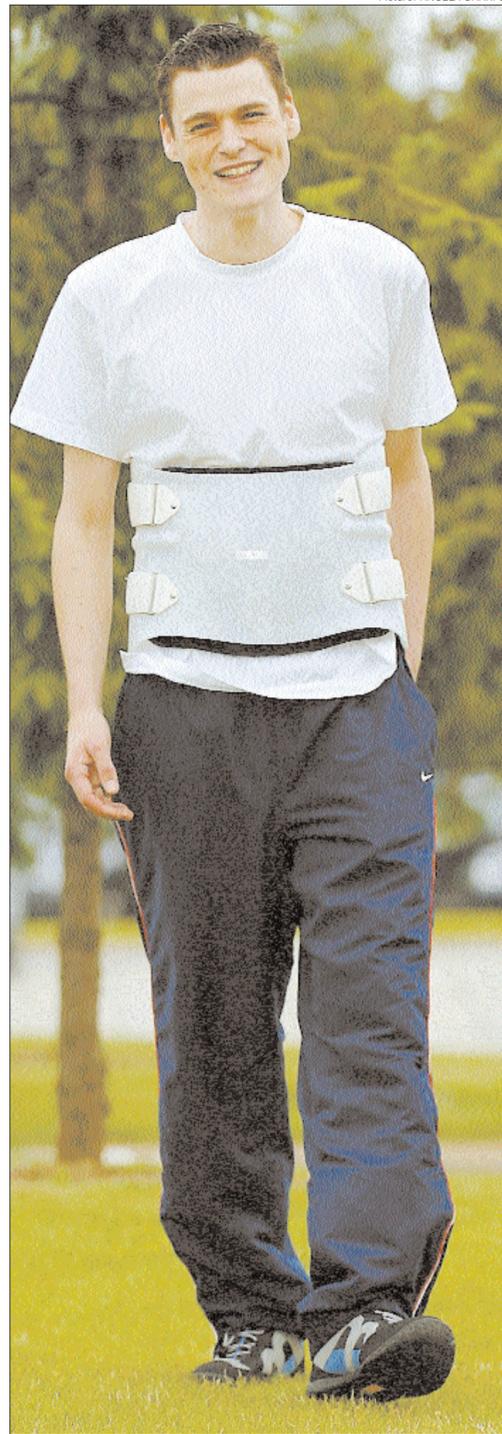
"Luckily, and with surgical expertise, we were able to reduce the fracture and the patient walked out of the hospital within two weeks, which is just amazing," he said.

"If he had a seatbelt on he would not have sustained this severe injury, he is the luckiest

TURN TO PAGE 12

Seatbelt warning

Picture: ANGELA SHARPE



WALKING: Matthew Hunt, from Harleston, on his feet.

■ FROM PAGE ONE

man alive. This case should highlight the importance of restraint and hopefully reduce our workload."

Mr Rai also praised the work of ambulance crews who were able to remove Matthew from the scene and get him to hospital without him suffering further neurological damage.

Norfolk traffic policeman Acting Sergeant Dave Cole said officers are aware young people are not wearing seatbelts as often as they should.

"We have had several incidents where young people have been involved and suffered traumatic spinal injuries as a result of not wearing seat belts," he said.

"My message from 20 years of being a police officer is that fatal injuries can be caused by people not wearing seatbelts. Seatbelts are there for the purpose of saving yourself from serious injury."

He warned that passengers in cars should also wear belts as when there is an accident they pose a serious risk to other people as they are flung around.

Swaffham-based Acting Sgt Cole added: "Police are often accused of having a petty attitude to the offence of not wearing seatbelts but we see the aftermath and consequences of not wearing one, which are very serious."

The offence carries a fixed penalty ticket fine of £30 and is non-endorsable.

"Our approach is one of education and enforcement and if someone is stopped we point out the error of their ways to them. The safety message we give out is

that they should be wearing their seat belt because we do see young people paralysed from the chest down with spinal injuries and having to live the rest of their lives in a wheelchair."

Ambulance technician Graeme Reece from the EAAT said he and his colleagues were becoming aware of people in the 17-24 age group not always wearing seatbelts and suffering serious injuries as a result.

Matthew of Briar Road, Harleston, said: "I was not wearing a seatbelt but now I will wear it all the time. I wouldn't have done half the damage I did if I had been wearing one."

"Everyone at the hospital has done a great job and I am so grateful to Mr Rai, he has been brilliant."

"I'd also like to thank the paramedics who got me out and the emergency services, and also my friends and colleagues who have visited me in hospital and at home and given me so much support."

His grandmother Myra Payne, from Starston, said: "The surgeons and the nursing staff have been absolutely wonderful."

"But now, when I see youngsters driving without a seatbelt on I feel I need to say to them that they should go and have a look at my grandson's x-ray."

The family is planning a fund-raising event later this summer for the intensive care unit and spinal injuries unit at the hospital.

■ COMMENT - Page 28

How N&N got

One moment Matthew Hunt was driving to work in his car, the next his whole life hung by a thread after he lost control and ended up in a field.

When paramedics discovered him soon after 7am on May 23, his feet were hanging out of the windscreen and his bottom was through the sunroof.

He had not been wearing a seatbelt and had been catapulted around the Peugeot 309.

He had a cut ear, punctured lung and a broken shoulder and ribs. Yet more seriously, his spine was horrifically fractured and dislocated.

As is standard practice at such a crash, ambulance crews made an assessment of the extent of his injuries, established the strong possibility of spinal damage and then cautiously removed him from the wreckage using a long board to minimise movement and further damage.

It was 25-year-old Matthew's good fortune that he was taken to the regional spinal injuries unit at the Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital and into the care of consultant orthopaedic and spinal surgeon Am Rai.

"When I looked at the x-ray the first time I saw him, it essentially showed a fracture dislocation of the spine," said the surgeon.

"In my experience, and that of a number of other senior surgeons, that would almost always result in complete paralysis and that is what I was expecting to see."

"But I was very, very surprised to see normal neurology."

Matthew was assessed, showed he could move all the different muscle groups and his sensations were all intact.

The x-ray revealed he had fractured the vertebrae in a number of places but the spinal cord was undamaged.

"This is extremely rare, we are reporting it as a one-off," added the surgeon.

Matthew Hunt will walk again thanks to the skill of a Norfolk surgical team.



Health correspondent MARK NICHOLLS looks at how they rebuilt his shattered spine.

Yet while Matthew was lucky to escape unparalysed from the crash, despite his horrific spinal break, the greater challenge lay ahead for the surgical team to repair the damage without causing further neurological injury.

"That made it more difficult to treat than someone with complete paralysis."

"If you have a fracture dislocation like this, usually there is no way you would be able to walk with that," said Mr Rai.

Experts from a number of specialisms met to discuss the case, MRI scans were carried out and a team brought together to operate and reduce the fracture of the spine.

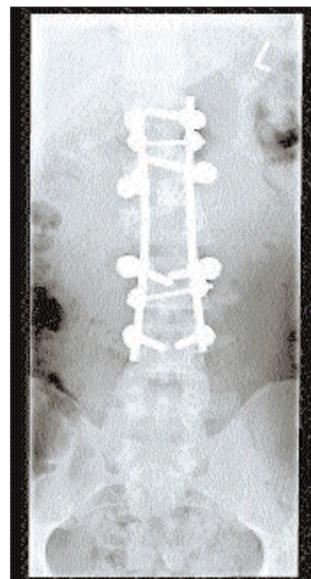
The operation, eventually to last up to six hours, took place on May 25.

"The delay was to make sure we had everything in place and that we were doing the right thing," said Mr Rai.

The team led by Mr Rai consisted of a registrar, senior house officers and general medical staff, a consultant anaesthetist, theatre nurses, radiologists and a neuro-physiological team.

In the early stages of the operation an incision was made in Matthew's back so that the spine and, more importantly, the cord could be identified.

for motorists



BEFORE AND AFTER: A CT scan of spinal injuries Matthew Hunt received in a car crash, left, and an x-ray which shows how it was reconstructed, right.

Matthew on his feet

Because of the risk of damage being caused during surgery - a risk that was explained to Matthew beforehand - a special monitoring system was put in place.

This involved putting monitors on his brain, attaching electrodes to the spinal cord and stimulating the muscles of his foot at regular intervals to measure his response.

In this way surgeons could assess whether they were causing any damage to the spinal cord and in turn respond to any changes.

This is a technique used by N&N surgeons when correcting scoliosis - curvature of the spine - but it is believed this is the first time such a technique has been used at the hospital in a fracture case.

A "scaffold" with screws carefully inserted into bone above and below the break was created before the surgical team realigned Matthew's spine and spinal cord.

A "cage" and artificial disc was then built around the break as it heals - one that will remain inside Matthew permanently. Matthew will also have to wear a supportive brace around his midriff for three months.

Mr Rai, who has been at the N&N for four years, is pleased with the outcome.

"It is an excellent outcome, we have treated a patient with a significant injury, it is very rare with this degree of displacement not to have neurological problems."

"But we would hope that within six months he will be able to resume normal activities."

Matthew, who works for Country Homes at Eye assembling mobile homes, remembers little about the crash or events of May 23 but recalls having his ear stitched and his clothes cut off.

But he adds: "Some time during the day I realised that I had broken my



RECOVERY: Matthew Hunt relaxes with grandmother Myra Paine.

back and I was in quite a lot of pain. I thought I was going to die. "I then thought that I was never going to walk again."

Yet through the success of the operation, Matthew has been able to

walk out of hospital. And with every step he takes from now on, he will remember with gratitude those in the medical profession who saved him from paralysis.