

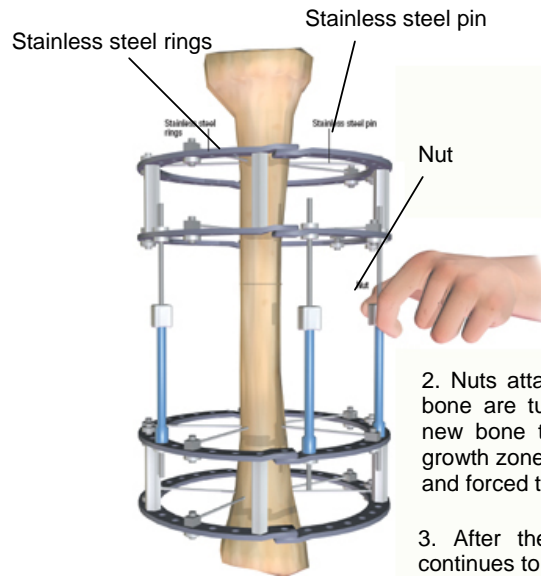
Teen with uneven legs goes for op to lengthen limb

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By Crystal Chan



Screw it in: Ms Huang Xinying showing how screws were inserted into her right leg to make it the same length as her right leg.



HOW ILIZAROV APPARATUS WORKS

1. The healthy part of the bone is cut into two parts using a saw. The leg is then fitted with the Ilizarov frame that pierces through the skin, muscles, and bone.
2. Nuts attached to the middle part of the bone are turned 1mm every day, so that new bone tissues that are formed in the growth zone are gradually pulled apart and forced to grow again to close the gap.
3. After the gap is closed, the patient continues to wear the frame until the new bone solidifies. Patients usually regain normal use of their legs four months after the surgery.

More doing so, says her surgeon

SHE had always walked with a slight limp because of the uneven length of her legs. But now, Huang Xinying, 18, can finally stand tall.

One of her legs was shorter than the other by 4cm. And she decided to do something about it after being told that she could end up with a serious spinal injury if she didn't.

The treatment? Sawing her leg in two to lengthen it.

Although it sounds medieval, the cutting of the bone is part of the Ilizarov procedure used by doctors to lengthen the legs of patients. (See graphics above.)

And one doctor says he is seeing more patients like Miss Huang coming forward for this operation.

Miss Huang, who recently got her O-level results, said she was born four months premature and got an infection soon after, leaving her with the uneven legs.

Her father, Mr Huang Wenming, 55, an odd-job worker, told The New Paper on Sunday that she weighed only about 500g at birth and had to stay in an incubator for a year.

Miss Huang, who has an elder brother, said: "Because of the irregularity in my legs, I was exempted from strenuous exercises during physical education lessons in school.

"I also had to go for annual check-ups to ensure the irregularity didn't affect my spine."

When Miss Huang was 10, she underwent an operation to straighten the knee cap in her right leg.

And when she found out last year that her leg condition could give her a spinal injury, her father decided to send her for the Ilizarov procedure to lengthen her right leg.

That was on 3 Dec last year. Today, Miss Huang's legs are of the same length.

Did they ever worry about her marriage and job prospects because her legs were uneven?

'Not bothered'

Miss Huang said she was never bothered about being disadvantaged as the difference in the lengths of her legs was not so obvious.

She said: "I was just like any other normal person. I never thought I'd be at the losing end when it came to finding a husband or going for job interviews."

After deducting subsidies for a C-class ward, Miss Huang's medical fees came to about \$4,000.

The surgery usually costs about \$10,000.

For a month after the operation, Miss Huang walked with crutches. And she still walks with a slight limp as the bones are yet to fully heal.

She goes for physiotherapy once a week and it will be another three months before she can walk normally.

Ilizarov surgery has been done in Singapore for almost 10 years and of late it has been done on more people suffering from dwarfism as well.

Associate Professor James Hui, who operated on Miss Huang, said he is seeing more people asking for longer limbs.

In 2007, only five people had this surgery done at the National University Hospital, but the number doubled last year.

Prof Hui operates only on those suffering from dwarfism and brittle bone disease or have limbs of uneven length.

He said people are becoming more confident about seeking help for these conditions.

But he does not encourage people to do the surgery for cosmetic purposes though it is common in Europe and China.

That is because there are still risks involved.

In 2000, 15-year-old Briton Emma Richards underwent surgery so she could qualify to be an air stewardess. She contracted an infection subsequently and suffered broken bones because of her weakened legs.

He said: "I strongly discourage people from doing the surgery just to become taller.

"All procedures come with risk and this is a major operation so unless the benefits outweigh the cons, patient should not subject themselves to additional risk."