

In Search of the Perfect Prosthesis

One woman's story of how attending the 2003 ACA Conference in Boston led her to the prosthetist that solved her problem

by Joan D. Bennett with Connie McGovern

"I figure there are three kinds of lower limb amputees: the athletic, the cosmetic and those who've given up. I've been the first two in greater and lesser degrees. I'm in danger of becoming the third kind."

So begins Connie McGovern's journal of her long search to find a comfortable, stable prosthesis. A native of St. Paul, Minnesota, she was born with proximal femoral focal deficiency (PFFD) and had her left leg amputated above the knee at age 13. It has not been since 1993 that she has had a prosthesis that feels both comfortable and safe. She knows it can be done and what a good artificial limb feels like. For Inextricably, she's had a string of ill-fitting prostheses. Her journal chronicles her ongoing despair and recent hope in recovering a way of life in which she feels safe and confident enough to navigate London's sidewalks and resume a life that includes world travel and golf.

Having lived in London since 2001, McGovern has worked with prosthetists on both sides of the Atlantic. *"I have a limb with which I can sit, but it is very unstable and uncomfortable while walking or standing," she wrote. "My prosthetist prescribes a so-called safety knee and I despise it. At any given moment, the knee might buckle and send me to the ground."*

Her therapeutic body worker alleviates her ongoing back pain, and they talk about what's wrong with the prosthesis. *"I tell Tinya I've been thinking about going to an amputee convention in Boston to find a prosthetist who can make me a really good leg, but I'm feeling a bit diffident. 'How many more legs will you have made?' she wants to know. I figure I'll be walking on prostheses into my early 80s. Six or seven, maybe. 'Why not go to Boston, then? Find someone who will get this right for you? Why wait?' She's right."*

Determined to regain her mobility, Connie attends the annual Amputee Coalition of America Conference & Exposition in Boston in July 2003. *"So here I am with this energetic, very physical, very mobile group of amputees and I'm using a cane. Very frustrating. On the first day, I go to my prosthetists' session to see if I can get an adjustment. After the presentation, I ask him. He declines, saying he doesn't have his tools. I am not impressed."*

Connie asks association members at the information desk if they know of any prosthetists with excellent reputations. An amputee named Donna overhears the question and tells her about a prosthetist from the northeast who is standing across the room. Her new friend asks the prosthetist to give Connie an adjustment.

“The prosthetist says sure and asks if I can wait while he sends for his tools. Of course I can. I’d wait all day. He turns the screw one and a half revolutions. I take my steps and can see immediately how much more stable I am. He explains that women need more adduction than men because our pelvises are wider.”

Back in London, Connie sees her prosthetist again because she continues to be unhappy with her safety knee. After a series of unsatisfying visits over several months, she gives up and calls the U.S. prosthetist. He remembers her. She flies from London for a one-week visit to get a new prosthetic leg.

On Monday, the first day, the prosthetist watches Connie walk. *“I learn this is his style - to watch and think and look and think. And so I walk while he takes in the length of my steps, my shoulders, my lateral movement. He explains that the socket should contain my pelvic bones better and that without proper containment, I will always limp, feel unstable walking, and not be comfortable. Finally, he suggests some components that he thinks will work for me.*

“With the first check socket, the prosthetist wedges his fingers around the rim, checking for snugness. ‘Everyone’s got their own angle of the ramus bone,’ he says. ‘Knowing this angle helps me adjust the next check socket.’ The prosthetist suggests a lightweight hydraulic knee with an energy-restoring foot.

“On day two, the prosthetist brings in the second check socket, and it’s mounted on a small hydraulic knee, which he calls “the sweet little unit,” and a springy energy-restoring foot. I can see at once that he’s attached the socket and the knee differently than I’ve had done by anyone previously. The knee is attached farther out, sort of but not really bowlegged as opposed to knock-kneed. I can see he’s working with my frame, my skeleton. He pries his fingers into the rim, checking the angle of the ramus to the socket, and he seems satisfied.

Other prosthetists stop by to see Connie and take part in fine-tuning the fit of her prosthesis. *“It’s this collective database of knowledge these guys share that makes problem-solving that much better.*

“The next day, the hard socket has been replaced by a firm but pliable translucent shell covered by a slick black hard outer shell. The cutting away of parts of the hard shell, like everything else, is done incrementally. The prosthetist explains why each ‘step’ in the process is so important to achieve our goals. We discuss shoes. I think of all the shoes that I own that have been sitting idle for the last year. I want to err on the side of a higher heel. I walk for another hour or so, and they tell me I might as well go wear the leg to test it in the real world. I go shopping.”

On Thursday, Connie drops off a pair of new shoes at the prosthetist’s office so they can adjust the foot to the height of the shoes. And she leaves her new prosthesis so the technicians can add laminates and work on the cover while she spends a long weekend with friends in New York.

Monday arrives and Connie practices walking in her new prosthesis in front of the prosthetist. *“I walk and the prosthetist talks. ‘Bring your left arm in and rotate your shoulders. Work those butt muscles. Try taking a longer step to stretch out those weak muscles in your residual limb. There you go. Faster now! Power walk. Come down on those heels. Fire yourself forward. Fire that leg ahead.’*

“The prosthetist’s father was a physical therapist, and he has an appreciation for movement of the whole body. It’s a new and refreshing experience, and I wonder if all prosthetists should have some training in gait and physical therapy. He videotapes my progress, and I can’t believe the changes that have taken place in such a short time.”

On Tuesday afternoon, Connie stops by to see the prosthetist before returning to England. *“He walks out with me and dumps my satchel in the back of the car. It’s hard to believe I was using a cane when I first encountered him in Boston. Now I walk so much more naturally, and without thinking. It’s such a relief.*

“When I get back to London, I’ll start all over again on my stretching, toning and strengthening. It’s a new year, and I’ve personally declared it the year of my strong and stable body.”

Connie flies off in a Manchester sunset and hours later awakens to a London sunrise, optimistic that she has finally found the well-fitting prosthesis that she has searched so long for.