

S. Africa cloned skin recipient to leave hospital

June 26 2012, by KIM CHAKANETSA



Burn survivor, Isabella "Pippie" Kruger is comforted by her mother Anice, as she recovers from surgery after undergoing a skin transplant operation two weeks ago in Johannesburg, Tuesday June 26, 2012. Kruger became the recipient of pioneering surgery when her burnt skin was layered with cloned skin grown from her own cells in a US laboratory. It was the first operation of it's kind in South Africa. Kruger suffered 3rd degree burns to 80 per cent of her body on New Year's eve when a gel firelighter exploded while her father was preparing a barbecue. (AP Photo/Denis Farrell)

(AP) — Bedtime for 3-year-old Isabella Kruger now includes a bottle and a massage. This ritual has become possible again as the toddler recovers from surgery that transplanted cloned skin onto her body after 80 percent of it suffered burns in a backyard accident.

On Tuesday, Isabella, better known as Pippie, was fed her bottle by her

mother Anice Kruger. Pippie is now fully awake and no longer reliant on feeding tubes after being kept under complete sedation for more than a week to ensure she kept still and did not tear her fragile new skin.

Doctors allowed an Associated Press team into Pippie's room in a Johannesburg hospital on Tuesday, another sign that the toddler is getting better.

"She is doing really, really well," her mother said.

Earlier this month, Pippie received 30 to 40 grafts of skin which had been cloned in a laboratory in Boston using a sample of her own skin and mouse cells as a scaffold.

Since the operation, Pippie has started to eat baby and mashed food and even some chicken.

The surgeon who attached her skin, Dr. Ridwan Mia, says it is crucial that she is well-nourished in the weeks to come.

"Her body is building muscle, recovering, healing wounds, healing the grafts. We want her to be nice and strong," Mia said.

For her mother, Pippie's recovery is nothing short of a miracle.

She remembers with clarity the moments after a bottle of fire-accelerating gel exploded during a family barbecue, leaving her little girl with severe burns.

"It literally looked like she was boiling. Her skin was just falling off," Kruger said.

Burn victims rarely survive such severe injuries. But Pippie was a

fighter.

In the months that followed, Pippie survived multiple cardiac arrests and organ failure before undergoing the skin transplant.

Mia, the surgeon, said that the skin on her legs, head and arms has taken "quite well" while the [skin](#) on her chest remains "very fragile".

He said the child is likely to be discharged "towards the end of next week." Still, after that, Pippie will have to undergo daily physiotherapy.

"There is a lot of loss of muscle bulk and strength, which is something she has to work on. It is almost like a baby that needs to gain tone and muscle," Mia said.

Another aspect of her rehabilitation will be psychological counseling.

Pippie's mother is aware that recovery will take a long time, but she is optimistic.

"The thing I'm looking forward most is just to feel her arms around my neck again. Just to get a hug," she said.

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