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First Hand Transplant Recipient on West Coast Introduced to Public Today

Emily Fennell was introduced by UCLA Medical Center's Transplant Program six weeks after life-changing surgery.

By [Anne Louise Bannon](#) | [Email the author](#) | April 19, 2011

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Six weeks after enduring 14 hours of surgery to attach a new hand to replace the one she'd lost in a car accident, hand transplant recipient Emily Fennell was introduced to the public at the Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center.

"I can wiggle the fingers and after hand therapy, I can pick up small objects," said the 26-year-old Yuba City resident at a press conference sponsored by the medical school's Hand Transplantation Program.

Fennell's surgery, which was done at the medical center on March 4, was the first hand transplant done west of the Rocky Mountains. Only 13 other people have received hand transplants in the nation.

Fennell lost her right hand in a car accident in 2006. Her name had been withheld at her request until today.

As the director of the hand transplant program, Dr. Kodi Azari, noted, the surgery carries significant risks and is only for those persons who are healthy, recovered from the trauma of their injury both physically and mentally and who have had little success with prostheses.

"It's not for everyone," he said.

Chief among the risks, aside from those normally associated with an extensive surgery, is that Fennell will have to take immuno-suppressant drugs for the rest of her life so that her body doesn't reject the hand. The drugs often carry side effects and will also make her more susceptible to infection. While Fennell did not elaborate on any side effects she has had, she did say that she had been made well aware of the risks.

"I decided that being made whole again out-weighed the risks," she said.

Fennell, who currently works as an office assistant in an undisclosed county human resources department, said that she could type 45 words per minute left-handed. She hopes that she will be able to type both handed and plans to move up to a higher-level position in her department when she can. When asked, she said that she was considering a medial position.

For the immediate future, she remains an outpatient at UCLA, undergoing ongoing therapy for a full year as she trains her brain to accept the new hand and use it normally.

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