

health

Slippery suckers prove a surgeon's secret weapon

By ROSANNA CANDLER

LEECHES are usually found attached to the ankles of unsuspecting holidaymakers, but last month the bloodthirsty blighters played an important surgical role at St John of God Hospital in Subiaco.

After a seven-hour operation to reconstruct tissue on an 88-year-old woman's face and neck, consultant plastic and reconstructive surgeon Mark Lee said he and ear, nose and throat surgeon Marcus Atlas were concerned when the woman's left ear began to swell and turn blue.

"Since she had previously undergone an enormous amount of cancer surgery and radiation, when we replaced the tissue it was clear that blood supply to her ear had been compromised," Dr Lee said.

"When blood can get in but not get out, then that tissue will inevitably die."

The hospital ordered a tank of leeches from Royal Perth Hospital and intensive-care nurses applied a leech to the ear every two hours.

"For family and friends coming to visit and seeing a very large leech hanging off granny's ear, I admit it might have been



The "gross-out factor" aside, surgeon Mark Lee says leeches are a perfect tool.

confronting," Dr Lee said.

"The bottom line is that we were able to save her outer ear, which otherwise would have been a very significant defect and compromised our ultimate goal to recover hearing in that side.

"Leeches are the perfect tool – they have been designed by nature over millions of years to do just what we want them to do," he said.

"The leech has multiple anti-coagulants in its saliva, an anaesthetic so it doesn't hurt, and even an anti-platelet drug.

"I imagine it is only the gross-out factor that poses the biggest problem for people."

Dr Lee said the patient was fortunate to have had a combination of high-level 21st century medicine with an ancient technique first written about in 800BC.

"Occasions like these remind me what I love about plastic surgery," he said.

"It's not a bunch of cookbook operations, the great challenge in my work is finding the answers to all sorts of unusual problems."



Plastic and reconstructive surgeon Mark Lee. d404323