

# More than scabs and stitches: A Qualitative Analysis of Burn Survivors' Treatment and Recovery Process

## Project Outcomes

Survivors of burn injuries reported ongoing emotional and physical issues during long recoveries. Their memories of inpatient treatments included miscommunications and feelings of fear, pain, and depersonalization.

## Data Source/Population

We conducted 11 interviews with burn injury survivors and used thematic analysis to identify factors that were influential in the recovery process.

7 Women  
4 Men

4-56 years old at  
time of burn

3 months–26  
years since the  
burn

31–63 years old  
at time of  
interview

0-15% to >50%  
TBSA

5 live in rural  
areas

15–126 miles  
from tertiary care  
center

5 used organized  
peer support

## Clinical Implications

- These shared memories provide us with a deeper understanding of our patients' perceptions of their treatments and recovery and the continuing challenges they face, and can help us provide better patient-centered care and offer appropriate resources.
- While we cannot generalize from these findings, they provide us with avenues to explore to help us improve our care and our patients' journeys.

## Funding and Disclosures

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## Results

**Hospital Memories:** Participants felt gratitude for their providers. However, they also reported memories of communication mishaps, noise and disruption, and feelings of depersonalization, pain, and fear during their hospital stays and treatments.

*"There are no words to show my appreciation... I really don't know how to say thank you. It's not enough." (2 years)*

*[when the patient realized the procedure was 5-hour pedicle flap not 2-hour laser] "My driver said, 'I can only be here another three hours! I cannot stay until you finish.' What am I going to do?" (2 years)*

*"When I got the skin graft...they gave you a book, and they showed you. At that point, I was still so upset about the burn, I couldn't even look at it, ... it upset me to look at the book, to see what they were gonna do to me." (Months)*

*"I was naked one day...and they had all these medical students around me and the lady... was drawing on me and pointing and stuff and I didn't feel like a person." (1 year)*

*"There was another patient and then it was me and it was just a curtain separating it. I didn't feel like I had a lot of privacy. Then, a guy ... just walked in and stared at me and then he walked back out." (1 year)*

*"They basically just skinned you." (3 years)*

*"It is torture at the burn unit .... It's the afterwards. The skin. Showering. The ointment. Being wrapped up and unwrapped, and then the showers. No, it's hell." (2 years)*

**Skin and Mobility:** Skin and mobility issues continued to impact participants even years after their injuries, including activities of daily life, and sometimes in ways they felt unprepared for.

*"I always wear a long-sleeve shirt when I go outside to keep my grafted skin from getting sun tanned or burnt...It would be cracking all the time." (9 years)*

*"Because of my arms being contracted the way they were, when I had to use the bathroom, wipe, or something, I couldn't really reach back there right because it was contracted so far... My arm now, I still can't straighten it completely." (5 years)*

*"They give you all this stuff and tell you what to do, but it's like you really don't know how to do it. It's really scary, pulling all that stuff off and seeing all that." (Months)*

**Recovery Experiences:** In describing their recoveries, participants discussed the lasting trauma of the injury and the feeling that others may not adequately understand.

*"It was a traumatic time for me. Today, I still don't talk about it much. Because how do you tell somebody that your hands are out here in front of you, and there's blue flames comin' up off your fingers and your skin?" (5 years)*

*"A lot of people, they'll be like, 'How are you doing? Are you healed?' I'm like, 'Well, the wound is healed.' There's so much more to it than just scabs and stitches when they're healed. People don't understand that sometimes...I don't think people really understand... what a burn is." (Months)*

*"Sometimes [my wife] understands but there's a lot of things that she don't. She still thinks I'm the same old me sometimes too and expects things to be done right now or the same old way, but it just can't happen that way anymore. You would think after almost nine years we'd both be getting used to that but you just don't." (9 years)*