

Surgeons want to help heal the scars of war

by Ben Beversluis | The Grand Rapids Press
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[Press Photo/Lori Niedenfuer Cool](#)

Dr. Bradley Bengtson, left, and Dr. Steve Ringler, partners in the Center for Aesthetics and Plastic Surgery, will provide surgical care for facial injuries and scars for veterans of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Two local plastic surgeons, experienced in providing free care overseas, have brought the mission home. They are leading others in the local medical community in a project to repair scars -- literally -- from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. "We thought, why not in our own backyard?" said Dr. Steven Ringler. He and his partner, Dr. Bradley Bengtson, said they wanted to show appreciation to West Michigan veterans for their "service and sacrifice." The two have invited to a Jan. 13 clinic any veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan who might need cosmetic correction or reconstruction of facial injuries. The free screening will determine who might benefit from outpatient surgery.

IF YOU GO

Medical specialists are looking for veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan needing help with facial scars or injuries.

Who: Veterans who might benefit from facial cosmetic correction or reconstruction

What: Clinic to find patients who might benefit from outpatient surgery

Where: Center for Aesthetics and Plastic Surgery, 2680 Leonard St. NE, Grand Rapids

When: 2 to 7 p.m., Jan. 13; surgery will be scheduled later in February

How: Register for the clinic by calling (616) 588-0888, 588-2277 or e-mail

vets@capsmi.com

That treatment will be done with the volunteer help of various staff at Spectrum Health Blodgett Hospital, anesthesiologists from Anesthesia Medical Consultants and possibly other needed surgical specialists, with the hospital itself providing facilities.

The pair pointed out support is essential, since they need a facility and those costs are significant compared, for example, to when they do volunteer work overseas. The pair has no idea how many responses to expect. Services could range from a simple procedure to fix a pigmented scar to major reconstruction. In some cases, such work might not be covered by insurance. In others, vets might not even realize what could be done to help, they say. So prospective patients must come to the free screening, at which the surgeons will evaluate scars, burns and other traumatic injuries to see which might be cosmetically enhanced or reconstructed on an outpatient basis. Those who qualify will have surgery on a Saturday in February. The two point out that many of the advances in medicine and, particularly, plastic surgery, came out of war, so donating their services to veterans of war is appropriate. "The circle is kind of completed," Ringler said. Bengtson has co-authored books on Civil War injuries and battlefield medical care. He said fixing physical scars could help veterans put some other trauma behind them. And he cited two primary motivations -- that they have "been blessed so much, we need to be a blessing to others," and the need to provide support and thanks to service people as well as the families who endured their time away.

Some of their inspiration came from billionaire and philanthropist Sheldon Adelson, owner of the Sands Corporation of casinos and hotels, who treats wounded soldiers to a special week -- and who has challenged other people to show their appreciation for veterans, too. The two said if the response is good, they might expand the program, possibly to veterans of earlier wars. And if they identify other medical problems they can't fix now, they might be able to develop a network of medical professionals, other specialists, willing to help. "Maybe we'll inspire other people to do something," Bengtson said.



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