

Surviving a catastrophe

Meet the cat that fell four storeys... and lived to tell the tale.

BY DR ALEX MELROSE



1. Wallaby assumes the position, meerkat-style. 2. Wallaby is prepped while the pulse oximeter measures his vitals. 3. Shattered bones, everywhere. 4. The bone pins have brought everything nicely into line. 5. Wallaby catches mice with his new bionic arms.

Photos by Michelle Kitchin

A young grey tabby boy was rushed into our clinic after he was found lying in a gutter, unable to use his front legs. He was understandably distressed on arrival but quickly settled as the morphine kicked in to dull his pain. Examination and X-rays revealed shattered spiral fractures of both upper forelimbs. Pieces of bone floated loose in surrounding muscle bellies and the broken ends of bone were separated by large gaps.

We discovered later that he'd fallen four storeys onto the road below, his front legs buckling as he landed! Amazingly, and with the help of the cocktail of drugs coursing his body, he began to push himself along towards us with his back legs, sliding across his blankets to encourage us to stroke the top of his head.

Time ticked by, and with no owner found and damage resembling that of a mini-grenade, we had some hard decisions to make about this little guy's future. As a team, we made a call to treat

his massive injuries regardless of time and cost to ourselves. This cat was too cool to let perish. He sat back on his haunches, crippled legs tucked into his chest, and watched our every move, instantly earning his new name, Wallaby.

Wallaby was anaesthetized and partially shaved, his legs suspended and paws bandaged to assist sterile preparation. A pulse oximeter attached to his tongue monitored heart rate, rhythm and oxygen saturation as we worked on him. As Wallaby was transferred into a fully sterile surgical theatre other monitors recorded blood pressure, ECG tracings and body temperature. The large display screen resembled the opening scene from *The Six Million Dollar Man*. Cutting began and retractors assisted us in getting to the fracture sites to expose the shattered bone.

Next we realigned the ends and drove orthopaedic pins through the hollow centre of the bones to stabilise the pieces,

while tiny encircling wires were used to pull the loose fragments together. Once we were happy with the result we started suturing everything back together and post-operative X-rays confirmed correct pin placement. Wallaby then began the long path to recovery, starting with strict rest in his cage and progressing to tentative steps in the hospital, surrounded by a crowd of vet nurses.

Six whole weeks had passed when suddenly Wallaby's owner arrived; they had tracked him down through our lost-cat internet postings. Wallaby and his family were pretty excited and tears, laughter and contented purring followed, as he answered to his old name – 'The Dude.'

Three orthopaedic operations, months of care and litres of medicines later, we have rebuilt him. Perhaps not better, faster or stronger than before, but alive and happy. He's not quite the \$6 million cat (more like the \$6000 cat), but he sure is one lucky dude! 