

Fake toe on mummy may be world's oldest prosthetic

An artificial wood and leather big toe discovered on the foot of an Egyptian mummy could be the world's earliest functioning prosthetic body part.

The fake toe from the Cairo museum in Egypt was found in 2000 in a tomb near the ancient city of Thebes. Archaeologists speculated that the 50- to 60-year-old woman the prosthesis came from might have lost her toe due to complications from diabetes.

The wood and leather prosthesis dates from 1069 to 664 B.C., based on artefacts it was found with in the mummy's burial chamber. This means it predates what was previously thought of as the earliest known functioning prosthesis, the Roman Capua Leg, a bronze artefact dating from about 300 B.C.

The leg was once at the Royal College of Surgeons in London but was destroyed by bombing during World War II.

Volunteers who have lost their right big toe are now being recruited to see how effective replicas of the prosthesis are.

Replicas of a second false Egyptian right big toe on display at the British Museum in London, albeit without its mummy, will also be tested.

This artefact, named the Greville Chester Great Toe after the collector who acquired it for the museum in 1881, is made from cartonnage, a sort of papier machie made using linen, glue and plaster. Based on the way the linen threads were spun, it dates from 1295 to 664 B.C.

'If either prosthesis aids walking or balance then the history of prosthetic medicine will be pushed back some 600 to 700 years and credited to the ancient Egyptians,' said researcher Jacky Finch at the University of Manchester's KNH Centre for Biomedical Egyptology in England.

'If either one is functional it may be interesting to manufacture it with modern materials and trial it for use on people with missing toes.'

The ancient Egyptians often restored artificial body parts to corpses, which means what might appear to be useful prosthetics actually were not.

Scientists have found a variety of artificial body parts restored on mummies, including feet, legs, noses, ears and even penises. 'You were still able to procreate in the afterlife,' Finch told LiveScience.

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