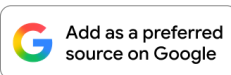


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Surgeons one day may discard their steel scalpels in...



POCATELLO, Idaho -- Surgeons one day may discard their steel scalpels in favor of obsidian blades fashioned through a variation of the prehistoric craft of flint-knapping, two anthropologists say.

Enlarged 10,000 times under an electron microscope, the edge of a steel scalpel blade 'looks like the Rocky Mountains,' said J. Jeffrey Flenniken of Washington State University.

On the other hand, stone blades have keen edges because they are fashioned 'naturally.' He said they can be broken to the last molecule.

Flenniken said he and anthropologist Payson Sheets of the University of Colorado have developed a method of producing obsidian blades that may eventually be proven more efficient than conventional scalpels.

Stone blades now are used by only a few surgeons, and on rare occasions, the researchers said.

The two said they were inspired by Donald E. Crabtree, a Kimberly man who specialized in flint-knapping and was a research associate at Idaho State University in Pocatello.

Idaho State officials said Crabtree, who died last year, had so much faith in the blades he honed from stone that he twice underwent surgery in which several surface incisions were made with his own obsidian scalpels.

While laboratory comparisons of the sharpness of obsidian versus steel blades haven't been done, Bruce Buck, the surgeon who operated on Crabtree -- first on his lung and later on his heart -- said he wouldn't hesitate to have obsidian blades used on himself.

A possible drawback, however, is that minute flakes may chip off an obsidian blade. That is why Buck used the blade only for surface incisions. Another factor that needs further investigation, he said, is how well an incision heals when made with an obsidian blade.

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