Surgeon crafts boy’s thumbs
Local doctor gives new hope to Ghanaian born without the vital digits.

By Matt Morgan
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Minutes before his second surgery in the past four months, 2-year-old Dodwe Ayernor wrapped his thumb and fingers around a bottle of bubbles and opened it.

This simple feat of dexterity wouldn’t be much of an accomplishment for most kids his age, but it would have been a lot tougher for Dodwe before July.

The Ghanaian boy was born without thumbs.

His father, Tesa Ayernor, didn’t have much hope that his son would ever have full use of his hands. Doctors told Dodwe’s parents there were ways to help, but Ayernor wasn’t overly optimistic.

“We never really thought it was possible,” he said.

Not only did he have no thumbs, Dodwe was also born without a radius bone in his left arm, making his left wrist almost useless.

His mother knew the family didn’t have money to fix the deformities, but a friend suggested she reach out to Dr. Dror Paley, a surgeon based at St. Mary’s Medical Center in West Palm Beach. Paley specializes in limb lengthening and correcting deformities.

The doctor was quick to get back to them and agreed to meet near Washington D.C., while he was on vacation.

After the meeting, they were able to get the Child Foundation of Miami to pay for the procedure.

In July, Paley performed two surgeries.

On Dodwe’s left hand, Paley stabilized the wrist and corrected the condition known as radial club hand, which occurs when a person has no radius bone in the forearm.

The same day, he performed a pollicization, a procedure that moves the index figure to the thumb’s position, shaping it like a normal thumb.

Within weeks, Dodwe’s body adjusted to the new right thumb.
“It just moves perfectly,” Paley said. “You’d hardly distinguish that it isn’t a normal thumb.”

On Wednesday, Dodwe got his second thumb through the same procedure.

Paley performed the second pollicization at St. Mary’s Medical Center, and the Ayernors will be headed back to Ghana when Dodwe has use of the left thumb.

The more than two-hour surgical process is a complicated one, Paley said.

He has to put the area under 4.5 times magnification and there is a slim margin of error to avoid cutting blood vessels.

“If you injure that, game over. You can throw that thumb away, it’s dead,” he said.

Paley has had patients fly in from 80 countries. Though he wants to perform a perfect surgery every time, he gets a little extra enjoyment from helping people that wouldn’t have a chance otherwise.

One advantage for surgery on Dodwe’s right hand was that he had a condition known as a floating thumb. He had an appendage that looked like a thumb, but it was useless — no tendons connected to it.

But because of the floating thumb, Dodwe had five muscles connected to his index finger. Paley was able to move them over to the thumb to give Dodwe even more control.

He said it’s the best thumb operation he has ever done.

Tesa Ayernor and Dodwe’s grandmother Mary have remained in the country to support the boy, who will turn 3 in November. His mother went back to Ghana to give birth to another child but plans to return.

Tesa said the family is grateful to everyone that has helped them, specifically Paley and the children’s foundation that paid for the surgery.

Even when he heard his son would be getting thumbs, he never expected it would be this good.

“It’s remarkable,” he said, “the change, the improvement to be able to use his right hand.”