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HEADLINE: Michael May talks about what it feels like to have his sight restored after being blind for 43 years

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BODY:

RENEE MONTAGNE, host:

This is MORNING EDITION from NPR News. I'm Renee Montagne.

STEVE INSKEEP, host:

And I'm Steve Inskeep.

After most of a lifetime of blindness, Michael May is learning to see. He was three and a half years old when a chemical explosion took away his eyesight. Forty-six years later, surgery restored some vision in his right eye. He is one of the few people in recorded history to have their sight restored after a long period of blindness, and his case is recorded this week in the journal Nature Neuroscience. Michael May joins us now. Good morning.

Mr. MICHAEL MAY: Good morning.

INSKEEP: Can you describe the science a little bit here? What was wrong with you and how was it fixed?

Mr. MAY: Well, the medical problem was that the surface of my eye was burned but the inside was not. So what they're able to do once stem cell technology evolved to the point it has been in the last couple years, is replace the

surface of the eye with fresh tissue, let that grow in and then once that was healthy, they could then put in a cornea transplant, which of course they've done for many years.

INSKEEP: And when you first were able to see out of this eye, you weren't necessarily able to process what you saw.

Mr. MAY: The processing has been the issue all along. Once they got the optics working, then it's a matter of what does the brain remember and how much can it grow? I'm just learning the world one item at a time. I'm building my library of visual information of visual clues and there's no reason that that process can't continue. But I'll just get faster at understanding things. I won't necessarily get any better at discerning details.

INSKEEP: What does that mean exactly? You looked around the hospital room when they first took off the bandages and you didn't really know what a window looked like? You didn't know what a person looked like?

Mr. MAY: I know what people look like and windows and many of the things that were in the exam room. But I knew them tactilely. I knew how they felt so that really helped. I had a mind's eye image of what these things were like and certainly the visual impression might be a little bit different, but those other senses really work together with the vision to provide--when we use the word 'I see what you mean,' it really goes beyond what we see with our eyes.

INSKEEP: So what didn't you know? What couldn't you process?

Mr. MAY: Well, my wife was sitting there and I, of course, knew it was my wife because I heard her voice and how I would always know her. But when I looked at her and I saw her hair, which I'd always been told was blonde, I saw that it was a lot of different colors. I reached out and touched it and was trying to figure out, is that a shadow on your hair or is that really the color?

INSKEEP: You've talked about the fact that you have been successful in moving around even without your eyesight. It's my understanding that you went skiing for years and years while you were blind.

Mr. MAY: I did. I've always loved skiing. It's just another example of how blind people can push things to a really high level if you work hard enough. And in skiing, I learned to do that, to ski any mountain, anytime, any terrain, even when I wasn't familiar with it, because I had a guide.

INSKEEP: Been skiing since you got your vision back?

Mr. MAY: I was skiing--that was the first thing I wanted to do. I talked the

doctor into letting me go a month after I had my surgery. And that first experience I really found that I wanted to shut out the visual information when I was moving because it was so distracting, I couldn't ski comfortably. But now I can use the vision a little bit to help myself out.

INSKEEP: This whole eyesight thing is getting in your way.

Mr. MAY: I would say that I've learned to benefit from where it helps me out and to fall back on all my blindness techniques in 90 percent of the rest of life. It also is a really fun entertainment factor. I don't want to demean vision, not at all. But in fact it's great for looking at panoramas, for sitting on a sidewalk cafe and watching beautiful women walk by. For that matter, just a whole assortment of people, of colors, of clothes and skin and body size and shape and everything. It's just fascinating to look at.

INSKEEP: Michael May is in Davis, California. Mr. May, congratulations. Thanks very much.

Mr. MAY: Thanks very much.

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