

medical group health insurance plans.

"Sondra's hands are state-of-the-art," Dombo said. "They are where the future of prosthetics is going. This is not new-fangled stuff; this is stuff that amputees need and deserve."

Dombo said that a bill from the Amputee Coalition that has been languishing in the U.S Senate since "probably 2014" says in part:

"Amputees deserve whatever makes them get back to whatever quality of life they can get back to – if they want to work, if they want to exercise, if they want to cook, whatever they want to do, they deserve a chance to get back to that level of independence."

With a lack of federal action, the Amputee Coalition of America went to the states and presented training to amputees on how to get state bills passed. Dombo and her husband, John, attended in 2019, and she made it her goal to get the bill passed in Kansas.

With help from a lawyer/lobbyist who donated his time and an unwavering resolve, Dombo was able to get Blue Cross/Blue Shield to change its policy to cover group-funded myoelectric and microprocessor prosthetic devices beginning the first of this year.

"You have to be part of the group plan, and Haysville school district was," Dombo said, "and it was the one I was working on to get to pay for Sondra's [osseointegration] procedure."

The insurance covered the osseointegration procedure for Stieber, but "when it came down to covering the hand, I did not meet the criteria," Stieber said. Anonymous donors did pay the last \$50,000 for



COURTESY

Now a "cyborg," in her words, Sondra Stieber was the second person in the U.S. to undergo osseointegration in order to receive her new bionic arm.

the arm, but she has accumulated about \$200,000 in medical bills.

Stieber will be the first to say that it is entirely worth it.

"My doctors are excited about my progress – they even did cartwheels," she said. "They told me if I could reach a certain milestone by the end of the week, they would do cartwheels. I met that milestone the first day in therapy, so the doctor moved the table and let me video him doing a cartwheel."

"Knowing what the hand can do I sometimes feel frustrated that I can't learn faster, because it's going to take months of therapy, but as far as the progression is concerned, I'm meeting the milestones very quickly."

Dombo turned 65 and went on Medicare in 2019 and Medicare won't pay for microelectronics, "but with a lobbyist you could get them to keep paying to get yours fixed," she said. "We're working on getting Medicare to pay for new ones nationwide. If Medicare would do that, I think all insurance companies will."

"I'm fighting for other people and that's how I got Blue Cross/Blue Shield to change their policy, and then Aetna followed, and we're hoping United Health will too."

During her struggles to get insurance companies to pay for myoelectric hands, a vice president from Koch Oil and his wife who heard her story gifted her with the myoelectric hands she had been using in therapy at Peeples Prosthetics that cost \$130,000 each.

"I was just shocked," she said. "They walked up the stairs [of our home] carrying boxes and I said, 'those are my hands, what are you doing with my hands?' They couldn't even write me off as a tax deduction – I'm not a 501c3," she said. "So, I got my hands and I use them all the time."

Stieber was recently accepted to be an advocate for the Amputee Coalition of America and has been "offered lots of speaking engagements."

"I'm very interested in adult education and I think training teachers and prosthetists and getting the word out to medical folks that there is this new technology out there is important work," she said.

"Between Julie's advocacy in getting insurance approval and folks like me getting the word out there that better devices exist, it's just going to revolutionize prosthesis for upper limb amputees. It's going to make all the difference in the world." >>

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