

Spanish hospital claims world's first full face transplant

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Surgeons at a hospital in Spain say they have carried out the world's first full-face transplant, giving new hope to a young man who lost his face five years ago in an accident.

The operation was carried out by a 30-member medical team in late March, according to Vall d'Hebron Hospital in Barcelona.

While another 10 partial face transplants have been carried out around the world, this one is believed to have been the most complex.

PHOTOS



Spanish Dr. Joan Pere Barret poses for a portrait next to Magnetic Resonance Images of the man who underwent a full-face transplant at the Vall d'Hebron Hospital in Barcelona, Spain, Friday, April 23, 2010. (AP / David Ramos)



In this image taken from TV shows a computer-generated image released by the Vall d'Hebron Hospital in Barcelona, Spain on Friday, April 23, 2010, of one of the various steps undertaken to perform a full-face transplant on a young male patient in late March 2010. (AP / Vall d'Hebron Hospital, TVE, via APTN)



In this combo of computer-generated images released by the Vall d'Hebron Hospital in Barcelona, Spain on Friday, April 23, 2010, the various steps undertaken to perform a full-face transplant on a young male patient in late March 2010 are graphically illustrated. (AP / Vall d'Hebron Hospital)

The recipient, a farmer in his 30s, lost most of his lower face in an accident five years ago when he accidentally shot himself, *The Times of London* reported.

The hospital won't comment on what caused the accident, citing the man's right to privacy, but noted that the accident left the man using tubes to breathe and to be fed.

"He had such severe disfigurements that breathing, speaking and swallowing were a serious problem," the hospital said in a statement released Thursday.

Joan Pere Barret, the transplant medical team leader, told CTV News Channel Friday night that the surgery itself was a very "tricky situation" which took 24-hours to perform.

During the operation, doctors began with the donor, removing his jaw, nose, cheeks and parts of his eye cavities of the donor. They also took the donor face's soft tissue, including muscles, veins and nerves.

At the same time, they operated on the recipient, who had begun therapies to ensure his immune system would not reject the transplant. They removed the deformed parts of his face along with skin grafts from nine previous surgeries.

Barret said that the man was chosen from a field of potential patients because he was "in very good health" and was better able to withstand the rigors of the operation.

The surgical team then transplanted the donated face onto the recipient, connecting four jugular veins, and joining all the musculature and blood vessels.

A week after the operation, the patient asked to look at himself in the mirror. He was satisfied with what he saw, according to media reports.

The surgery left a scar that surrounds the patient's entire face, running along the roots of his hair, ears and under his chin.

"He looks like a completely new human being," said Barret, adding that the new face shares a resemblance to both the donor and the patient.

"It's something in the middle," he said, noting that some relatives have said they still see a resemblance to the older face.

The man is recovering well, the hospital said, and he is expected to remain there for two more months.

Though he still cannot eat on his own and needs help breathing, it's hoped that with rehabilitation, he will recover the ability to breathe, speak, and even smile.

The world's first partial face transplant was carried out on a woman in France in 2005 who had been mauled by her dog. She received a new nose, chin and lips. Others have followed in the U.S. and China and two more in Spain.