

Full face swap patient braves cameras

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The world's first full face transplant patient made his public debut before cameras today.

Identified only as Oscar, the 31-year-old spoke with considerable difficulty at a news conference at Barcelona's Vall d'Hebron hospital, where he was operated on in late March.

During the 24-hour surgery, doctors lifted an entire face, including jaw, nose, cheekbones, muscles, teeth and eyelids, and placed it masklike onto the man. He has been described as a farmer who was unable to breathe or eat on his own after accidentally shooting himself in the face five years ago.

The head of the surgical team, Dr. Joan Pere Barret, said that Oscar will need between a year and 18 months of physical therapy and is expected to regain up to 90% of his facial functions. He is now being released from the hospital and sent home.

He is able to drink liquids and eat soft foods, and has been able to speak for the past two months, the hospital said.

He has also regained feeling in most of his face and is partly recovering movement of his muscles. One good sign was that a week after the operation, he had to be shaved because of beard growth.

But he also suffered acute rejection twice - once four weeks after the surgery and again between the second and third months. Both times, the new face was saved with medication.

At the news conference, Oscar seemed relaxed as he looked out with eyes he cannot yet close completely.

Video: Face transplant- demo animation

A younger woman identified as his sister, whose name was not given to protect the family's privacy, said her brother looked forward to leading a normal life.

He is eager to enjoy "little things, like walking down the street without anyone looking at him, or sitting down for a meal with his family. Doing things that all of us do on a normal day," the woman said.

A French team announced a similar operation earlier this month, saying a 35-year-old man with a genetic disorder has an entirely new face, including tear ducts that cry and a chin that sprouts stubble.

The first face transplant, albeit partial, was carried out in France in 2005 and since then about a dozen more have been done, including three in Spain.