

Hospital performs first complete face transplant

MADRID -- A Spanish hospital said Thursday it performed the world's first complete face transplant in March on a man who could not swallow, breath or talk normally following an accident five years ago.

While 11 other face transplants have been carried out around the world previously, Barcelona's Vall d'Hebron hospital said they involved only part of the patient's face.

During the 22-hour-long operation, the unidentified young man received new facial muscles, skin, nose, lips, jaw, teeth, palate and cheekbones, the leader of the medical team that carried out the procedure, Joan Pere Barret, told a news conference.

A team of 30 experts carried out the transplant on March 20 and care was taken to ensure that the patient's new face was created in the likeness of the face he had before the unspecified accident and did not resemble that of the anonymous donor.

"The patient has scars on his forehead and neck, but in the future they will be fully concealed," Barret said.

"He saw himself in the mirror when he wanted to and when psychologists said that he was ready. It was a week after the operation and he reacted well, he was calm and satisfied," he added.

The first successful face transplant was performed in France in 2005 on Isabelle Dinoire, a 38-year-old woman who had been mauled by her dog.

Since then face transplants have been carried out in China, the United States and Spain, which carried out its first such operation in August 2009.

Spain led the world in organ donations in 2009 for the 18th consecutive year, according to the health ministry.

Spain's public health care system, which offers universal coverage as a constitutionally-guaranteed right, is ranked the seventh best in the world by the World Health Organization.