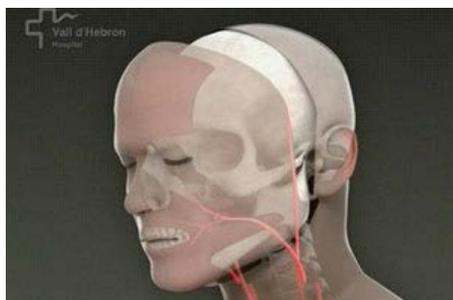


Surgeons complete world's first full-face transplant

A team of surgeons has carried out the world's first full-face transplant on a young Spanish farmer unable to breathe or eat on his own since accidentally shooting himself in the face five years ago.



It was the most extensive operation yet and the 11th known face transplant worldwide.

During the 24-hour surgery, doctors lifted an entire face, including jaw, nose, cheekbones, muscles, teeth and eyelids, and placed it mask-like onto the man, Dr. Joan Pere Barret said.

Transplant experts hailed the surgery, carried out late last month at Barcelona's Vall d'Hebron Hospital, as a significant advance.

"It is a breakthrough. They are pushing the envelope and I am very happy for them," said Dr. Thomas Romo, chief of facial and reconstructive surgery at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York.

The Spanish patient, who was not identified, now has a completely new face from his hairline down and only one visible scar, which looks like a wrinkle running across his neck, said Barret, who headed the 30-member surgical team.

The man cannot yet speak, eat or smile, but he can see and swallow saliva, the surgeon said. He is expected to be able to eat and breathe on his own in about a week.

"If you look him in the face, you see a normal person," Barret said. "He sits up, he walks in his hospital room and he watches television."

Before the transplant, the 30-year-old patient had had nine surgeries and could only breathe with the help of a ventilator and get nourishment from a feeding tube. He also had problems speaking.

The 2005 accident, in which he shot himself with a shotgun, essentially destroyed his face from the eye sockets down, although his eyes and eyesight were unaffected.

During the daylong operation, Barret said his team cut off the donor's face below the eye sockets and attached the bone structure along with muscles and nerves to the recipient "in one piece."

"Imagine a skull. It is as if with a saw, we cut everything just below the upper part of the eye sockets, as if we were sawing all that," he said. Then, "everything attached to the mask is placed on the recipient."