

Man who received first full face transplant thanks doctors, donor



BARCELONA, SPAIN - JULY 26: Oscar, the world's first full face transplant recipient, participates in a press conference at the Hospital Universitari Vall d'Hebron on July 26, 2010 in Barcelona, Spain. The 31-year-old, who had been unable to breathe, swallow or talk properly after suffering an accident five years ago, thanked hospital staff and the donor's family (Photo by Jasper Juinen/Getty Images)

MADRID — A Spanish man who underwent the world's first full face transplant appeared before TV cameras Monday for the first time since his surgery, thanking his doctors and the family of the donor.

Identified only as Oscar, the 31-year-old spoke with considerable difficulty at a news conference at 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 Monday the man will need between a year and 18 months of physical therapy and is expected to regain up to 90 percent of his facial functions.

The news conference was called because the man was being released from the hospital and sent home.

He is now able to drink liquids and eat soft foods, and has been able to speak for the past two months, the hospital said in a statement. The patient also has 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, the statement said.

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

A younger woman identified as his sister, and also unidentified so as to protect the family's privacy, said her brother looks 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.