

World's first full face transplant patient appears before cameras

- Spaniard thanks doctors and donor's family
- 31-year-old farmer expected to regain 90% of facial functions

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Oscar, the world's first full-face transplant patient, was operated on in March by a 30-strong medical team after accidentally shooting himself in the face five years ago. Photograph: Reuters

A Spanish man who underwent the world's first full face transplant appeared before TV cameras today 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 Barcelona's Vall d'Hebron hospital, where he was operated on in March. During the 24-hour surgery, doctors lifted an entire face, including jaw, nose, cheekbones, muscles, teeth and eyelids, and placed it mask-like on to 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 30-strong surgical team, Dr Joan Pere Barret, said the man would need at least a year of physiotherapy and was likely to regain up to 90% of his facial functions.

The news conference was called because the man was being released from hospital. He is able to drink liquids and eat soft foods, and has been able to speak for the past two months, the hospital said.

The patient has regained feeling in most of his face and is regaining movement of his muscles. One good sign was that a week after the operation he had to be shaved because of beard growth.

But hHe 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.

Oscar seemed relaxed today as he looked out at reporters with eyes he cannot yet close completely.

A younger woman identified as his sister, but not named 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 this month, saying a 35-year-old man with a genetic disorder received an entirely new face, including working tear ducts and a chin that sprouts hair.

The first face transplant, albeit partial, was carried out in France in 2005. Since then about a dozen more have taken place, including three in Spain.