Spanish Hospital Claims First Full Face Transplant

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MADRID (AP) — A hospital in Spain said it has carried out the world's first full-face transplant, giving a young man who lost his in an accident a new nose, skin, jaws, cheekbones, teeth and other features.

The operation was carried out by a 30-member medical team in late March and took 24 hours to perform, according to Vall d'Hebron Hospital in Barcelona.

The patient 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 Dr. Joan Pere Barret, the surgeon who led the team.

"If you look him in the face, you see a normal person, like anyone else we have as a patient in the hospital," Barret told The Associated Press on Friday.

He declined to name the patient or give details of the accident five years ago in which he lost his face, saying only that he was a Spaniard between the ages of 20 and 40 and is recovering well. He cannot yet speak, eat or smile, but can see and swallow saliva.

"He is coming along well. He sits up, he walks in his hospital room and he watches television," Barret said. Barret said there have been 10 partial face transplant operations carried out in the world so far but this is the first involving a person's whole face. The world's first partial face transplant was carried out on a woman in France in 2005. Others have been done in the U.S. and China.

Barret said his team used the same techniques of plastic and microsurgery as in those cases, and simply chose to try for a full-face transplant because the damage suffered by this man was so severe. Since the accident, the patient has had to breathe and be fed through tubes and had problems speaking. Before this, he underwent surgery nine times.

A week after the operation, the patient asked to look at himself in the mirror and was satisfied with what he saw, Barret said.

The patient underwent psychiatric tests before the operation to determine if he would be able to confront having a totally new face, the hospital said.

He is expected to remain hospitalized for two months.

Hospitals in Spain have performed two partial face transplants, in Valencia and Seville.

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