Poland's First Face Transplant Patient Goes Home

Monika Scislowska, Associated Press

Poland's first face transplant patient was discharged from the hospital Tuesday, speaking with some effort at a press conference just 11 weeks after the extensive surgery that saved his life.

The 33-year-old man said he owes his doctors "everything" following a skin-and-bone transplant on May 15, three weeks after losing his nose, upper jaw and cheeks in an accident at the brick factory where he worked. Doctors say it was the world's fastest time frame for such an operation.

Doctors who performed the transplant at the Cancer Center and Institute of Oncology in Gliwice, in southern Poland, said the rehabilitation is proceeding faster than expected thanks to the "courage and determination" of the patient, identified only as Grzegorz.

He can breathe on his own, see, eat, taste and speak, although his speech is hard to understand because the face muscles still need to regain mobility. When that is achieved, through intensive exercise, he will need surgery on his right eyelid, which remains motionless. At the news conference, his eyes were hidden behind sunglasses.

The surgery reconstructed the area around the eyes, nose, jaw and palate and other facial areas, with the transplant running from above his right eye, under his left eye and around his face to his neck.

He will need to avoid large gatherings and sick people to protect against infection. He will take medication for the rest of his life, the anesthesiologist, Dr. Sebastian Giebel, told the news conference. Potted plants, rugs and the man's dog had to be removed from his home because they were potential sources of infection, he said.

Grzegorz will be able to resume work, though he will have to avoid working in agriculture, where he could catch fungi infection from the soil, according to Dr. Adam Maciejewski, who led the 27-hour operation

His mother was making roast duck for his homecoming, said his sister, who identified herself only as Barbara.

"We will see what comes next, but we are and will be with him," she said.

The patient took the microphone to thank his doctors. "My speech isn't clear, but it's really important that it is there," he said. "I know it's still a long way." His words were transcribed in a broadcast by TVN24 after the press conference.

He was injured in an April 23 accident at his job at a concrete brick factory near the southwestern city of Wroclaw when a packaging machine tore off most of his face, including the upper jaw.

He received intensive treatment at a hospital in Wroclaw that saved his life and eyesight. But an attempt to reattach his own face failed, leaving an area close to the brain exposed to infections.

The damage was too extensive for doctors to temporarily seal the wound, and an urgent transplant was the only way to save the man's life. Face transplants are extraordinarily complicated and relatively rare procedures that usually require extensive preparation of the recipient over a period of months or years, but the Polish patient's condition was deteriorating so rapidly that the doctors had to act fast.

The donor, a 34-year-old man, was chosen from a national registry of potential donors after his age, gender, blood group and body features were determined to be a good match for the injured man.

More than two dozen transplants of the face or parts of the face have been performed around the world. The first one was a partial face transplant on a woman maimed by her dog in France in 2005.

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