

Face transplants change lives, identity

July 23 2014, by Vivienne Rowland



Patients are prepared to take significant risks in order to be considered for a face transplant, says Dr David Koppel, director of the largest craniofacial unit in the UK and Honorary Clinical Associate Professor in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Glasgow.

Koppel delivered a lecture titled Preparing for the first face transplant in the UK on Friday, 18 July 2014, on invitation from the Wits School of Clinical Medicine and the School of Oral Health Sciences in the Faculty of Health Sciences. The first face transplant in the UK took place in 2013 at the Southern General Hospital in Glasgow.

"Patients are prepared to take significant risks, even being fully aware of the dangers, possibility of rejection and even potential death. They will do this in order to be able to lead normal lives without facial deformities," says Koppel.

Koppel spoke about how the craniofacial unit had to get the buy-in of several institutions, units, hospital teams, managerial teams, experts, technicians and the public before the life-changing procedure could be performed in the UK. After a process which lasted several years, the first transplant eventually took place in 2013.

"The first partial face transplant took place in France in 2005, while the first full face transplant took place in Spain in 2010. The time was right for us to do our own," said Koppel.

The complicated procedure involves using all or part of the face of a deceased donor to drastically change how the recipient looks. Potential donors include those who are currently on the organ donor register, however, doctors require additional consent from families. In the majority of cases, recipients – who will include war veterans and those disfigured in knife attacks – won't look exactly the same as the donor because some of their own features will remain.

"Donors are treated with dignity – we retrieve the face from the donor while the heart is still beating, but once the patient is deceased, the face and all removed limbs used for transplant procedures, are reconstructed with silicone, before the patient's family can see the body prior to burial," said Koppel.

Koppel said since the first [face transplant](#) procedure, 35 patients worldwide have undergone the procedure, with only three fatalities as a result of the operation.

Provided by Wits University

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