

Facing up to a new life

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If you'd heard Richard Norris's story just a few years ago, you might have assumed that it was the plot of some science fiction movie. But his is just one of a growing number of incredible examples of possibly the most jaw-dropping development in surgical history – the facial transplant.

When Richard Norris first saw his new face in a mirror, three days after a 36-hour operation to complete the world's most extensive face transplant to date, he was lost for words.

But doctors conveyed wonder on his behalf as Norris continued relearning to talk – 'this is so cool,' one of his surgeons kept repeating. Norris, 37, had lived behind a mask since a gun accident took away his lips, nose and the front part of his tongue 15 years ago.

Unusually for victims of facial gun injuries, his vision was largely unaffected, and so, as soon as possible after his surgery at the University of Maryland Medical Centre, he asked to see the results, doctors reported. On the same day, Norris, of Hillsville, Virginia, told them that he could smell, too.

The operation took place on 19 and 20 March. A week later, he was able to brush his teeth and shave. His new face, said lead surgeon Eduardo Rodriguez, is 'a combination of two individuals, a true blend'. A picture of how he looks now shows just how his face has changed since his high-school graduation in 1993, and since the gun accident that destroyed much of his face. Stitches along his hairline and neck and scarring round the eyelids showed the extent of his surgery.

Norris had been living as a recluse, avoiding eating in public and shopping for groceries at night. Since the accident, of which the hospital revealed few details, he has not had a full-time job and has already undergone numerous life-saving and reconstructive operations.

'This accidental injury just destroyed everything,' said Rodriguez. 'His friends and colleagues went on to start getting married, having children, owning homes. He wants to make up for all that.'

The operation, which involved more than 150 doctors, nurses and other staff, was just part of a remarkable 72 hours in which surgeons also transplanted a heart, both lungs, a liver and a kidney from the same anonymous donor, to other patients. For Norris, the surgeons transplanted teeth, the upper and lower jaw, a portion of the tongue and all facial tissue from the scalp to the base of the neck.

Rodriguez described Norris's reaction to seeing a mirror 'as one of the most emotional moments for him as well as for all of us. He put down the mirror and thanked me and hugged me, which was a wonderful gift.'

'It is a surreal experience to look at him. It's hard not to stare. Before, people used to stare at Richard because he wore a mask and they wanted to see the deformity ... Now they have another reason to look at him, and it is really amazing.'

1. Answer True or False according to the reading.

- a. Richard Norris underwent the world's most extensive face transplant to date.**

True

False

- b. Richard Norris's vision was severely impaired after the gun accident.**

True

False

- c. Richard Norris requested to see the results of his surgery as soon as possible.**

True

False

- d. The surgical team transplanted a heart, both lungs, a liver, and a kidney from the same donor in addition to performing Richard Norris's facial transplant.**

True

False

- e. Before his facial transplant, Richard Norris lived a reclusive life, avoiding public activities such as eating out and shopping during the day.**

True

False

2. Select the correct answer

- 1. What was Richard Norris's reaction when he first saw his new face in the mirror?**

a) He was speechless

b) He burst into tears

c) He laughed with joy

d) He expressed disappointment

2. How long did the surgical operation for Richard Norris's face transplant last?

- a) 12 hours
- b) 24 hours
- c) 36 hours
- d) 48 hours

3. Which medical center performed Richard Norris's facial transplant surgery?

- a) University of Maryland Medical Centre
- b) Johns Hopkins Hospital
- c) Cleveland Clinic
- d) Mayo Clinic

4. What did the surgical team transplant for Richard Norris, in addition to facial tissue?

- a) Liver
- b) Kidney
- c) Teeth and jaws
- d) Heart and lungs

5. How did Eduardo Rodriguez, the lead surgeon, describe Richard Norris's reaction to seeing his new face in the mirror?

- a) He was overwhelmed with joy
- b) He remained expressionless
- c) He cried uncontrollably
- d) He thanked and hugged the surgeon