

Transplant Recipient Hid Disfigured Face

AP Associated Press

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The woman who received the world's first face transplant generally kept to herself and wore a surgical mask to hide her disfigured face when she walked her dog on the pathways of her housing estate, neighbors said.

Many in her neighborhood of small red-brick apartment buildings in northern France did not even realize that the patient's face had been mutilated. They did not want to pry.

"Every evening, I saw her out walking, wearing a mask," said Belgassem Kahouri, a 57-year-old worker whose apartment overlooks the woman's top-floor windows, trimmed with white lace curtains. "I assumed she had an allergy or some problem breathing, maybe trouble with pollution."

Kahouri said he and some other neighbors learned the woman's story only by watching television news reports.

"She did not speak to people much, except maybe to say 'bonjour,'" said Moossa al-Karkouri, a 20-year-old student who often saw the patient out walking, sometimes with her mother, who lived in an identical building next door. "She seems to be a very discreet woman."

Doctors have refused to identify the woman who received the nose, lips and chin graft other than to say she was 38 years old, citing French laws protecting the anonymity of patients.

The patient's mother declined a request to be interviewed, saying she was overwhelmed and frustrated by the number of reporters who showed up on her doorstep, and worried about the effect it would have on her two teenage granddaughters.

The patient was mauled by a pet Labrador in June, leaving her with severe facial injuries that her doctors said made it difficult for her to speak and eat.

The dog was put down. Neighbors said the woman was an animal lover who bought a new dog after the attack — a smaller dog.

Jeanne-Marie Binot, administrator of the local Society for the Protection of Animals, said it was likely the Labrador had passed through her service, though she had no written record of it and did not recall the case.

One of the woman's daughters reportedly told French media that the dog had tried to wake her mother and had no intention of harming her — a scenario that a local dog trainer said was possible.

"The dog undoubtedly wanted to re-establish contact with (its) master, in any way he could," said Pascal Duplouy, who had no contact with the animal in question.

"It's true that when a dog is in a state of panic, it can scratch and scratch and scratch his master's face, to try to wake her, without realizing the harm it's doing," Duplouy said.

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