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French carry out first face transplant

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French surgeons have carried out the first face transplant using material from a brain-dead donor to rebuild the face of an anonymous 38-year-old woman who lost her nose, lips and chin during a dog attack.

According to the BBC, the surgical team, led by Professor Bernard Devauchelle and Professor Jean Michel Dubernard, carried out the five-hour operation in Amiens over the weekend. They took tissues, muscles, arteries and veins to create a "hybrid" face, stressing that the patient would not completely resemble the donor. The hospital reported that the graft "looked normal".

Face transplants have been technically possible for several years, the BBC notes, but ethical and psychological concerns surrounding the technique have put a brake on their adoption in the UK and US. The French recipient is reported to have received considerable counselling before the operation, although Iain Hutchison, an oral-facial surgeon at Barts and the London Hospital, raised other more concrete concerns.

"In the short-term, blood vessels in the donated tissue could clot," he said. "And in the long term, the immunosuppressants fail. The drugs also increase the patient's risk of cancer."

Hutchinson added: "Where donors would come from is one issue that would have to be considered. The transplant would have to come from a beating heart donor. So, say your sister was in intensive care, you would have to agree to allow their face to be removed before the ventilator was switched off.

"And there is the possibility that the donor would then carry on breathing," he concluded.

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