

Woman can speak again after voice box transplant

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(AP) -- A woman is able to speak again after she had a rare operation to replace her voice box, her doctors said.

Brenda Charett Jensen, 52, will reunite on Thursday with the international team of surgeons who performed the transplant last October. Jensen is only the second person in the world to have a successful larynx transplant.

Jensen damaged her vocal cords more than a decade ago after she repeatedly pulled out her [breathing tube](#) while under sedation in the hospital.

Before the transplant, the Modesto woman "talked" with the help of a handheld device that sounds like an [electronic voice](#), but always yearned to speak with her natural voice.

The operation last fall lasted 18 hours over two days. Doctors replaced her voice box, windpipe and [thyroid gland](#) with that of a donor who died in an accident. The surgery was led by doctors at the University of California, Davis Medical Center and included experts from England and Sweden.

The team spent almost two years training for the operation, honing their skills using animals and human cadavers.

Two weeks after the transplant, Jensen voiced her first words in a hoarse

tone: "Good morning" followed by "I wanna go home" and "You guys are amazing" to her doctors.

Jensen has since been able to speak more easily, according to her doctors. She still breathes with the help of a tracheotomy tube and is relearning how to swallow. It'll take some time before she can eat normally again.

UC Davis paid for much of Jensen's hospital-related expenses, which were not immediately disclosed. Doctors and staff donated their time.

Not everyone who loses their voice is eligible for a voice box transplant. It's still considered experimental and recipients have to take anti-rejection drugs the rest of their lives. Jensen was a good fit because she was already taking the drugs after a kidney-pancreas transplant in 2006, doctors said.

Unlike life-saving heart or liver transplants, people can live many years without a voice box though a transplant would improve their quality of life. There haven't been many voice box transplants done because they're not covered by private or government insurance, said Dr. Gerald Berke of the UCLA Head and Neck Clinic, who had no role in Jensen's care.

In 1998, doctors at the Cleveland Clinic performed the world's first successful [larynx](#) transplant, restoring the voice of Timothy Heidler after a motorcycle accident.

Three years later, Heidler was speaking with a perfectly normal voice, his surgeon wrote in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

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